

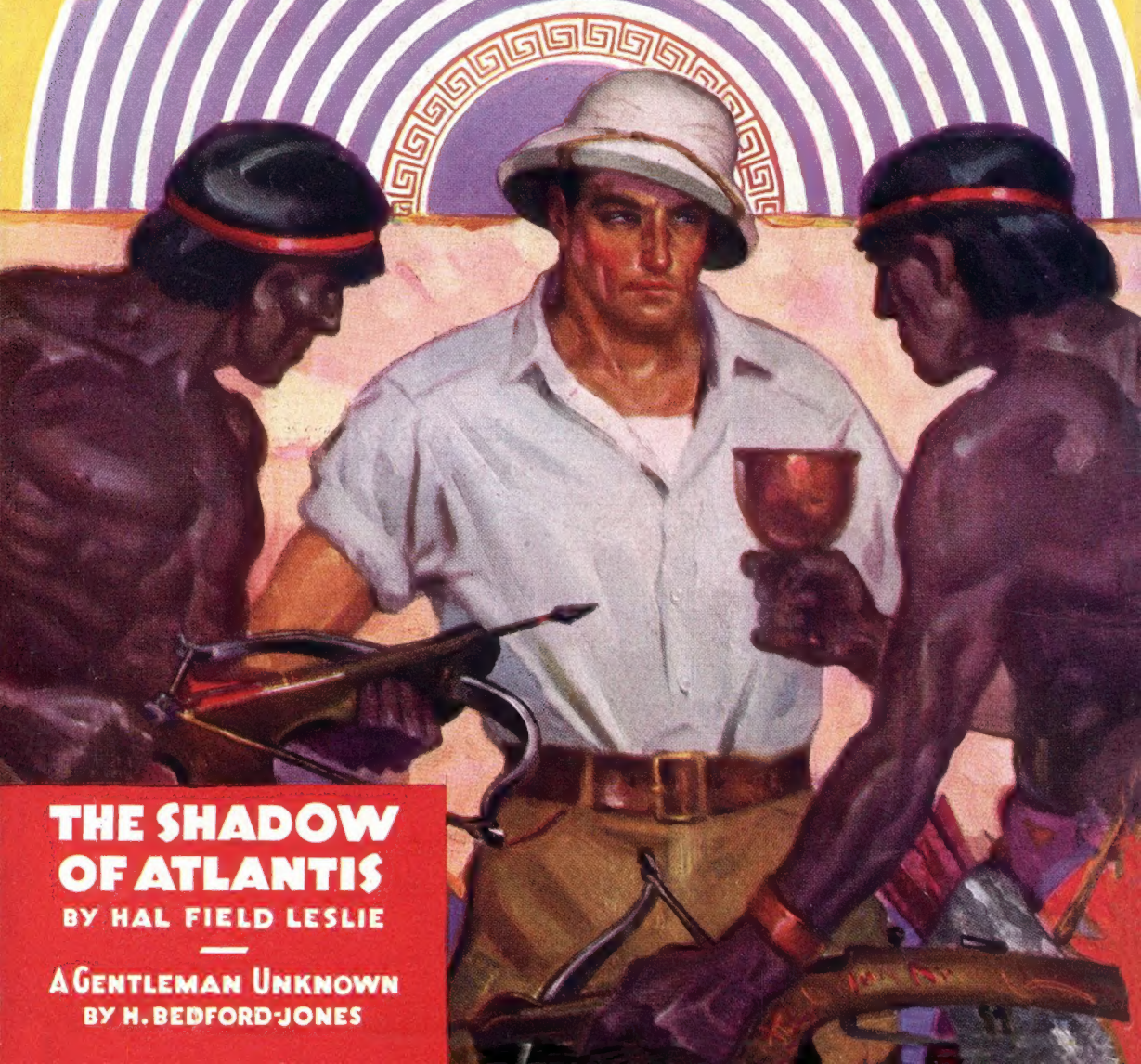
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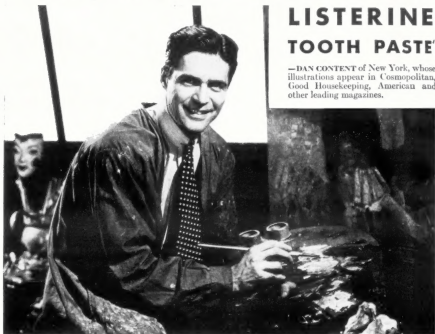
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Volume XCV

September, 1934

No. 3

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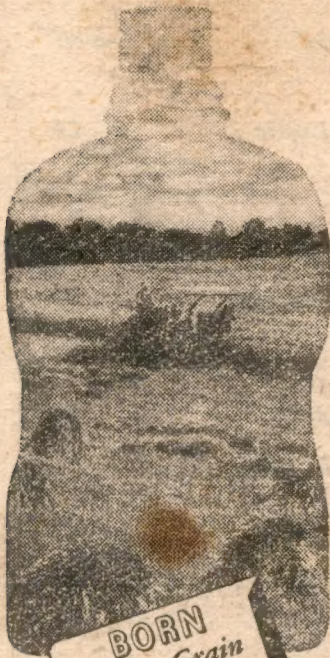
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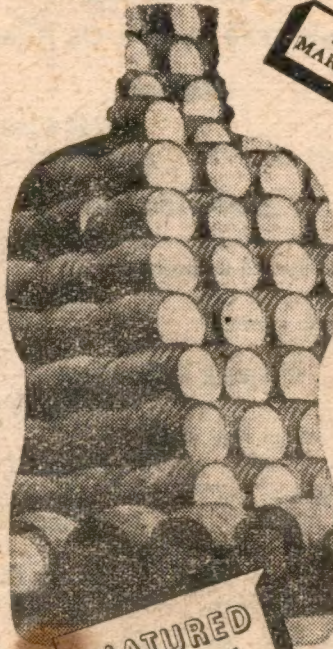
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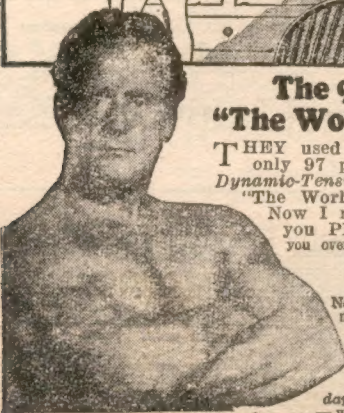
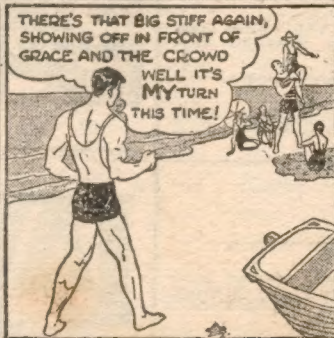
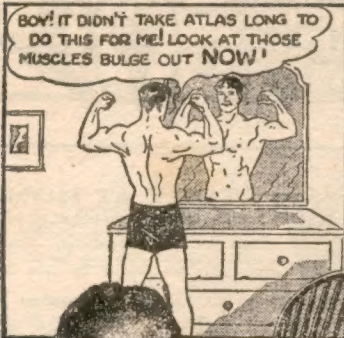
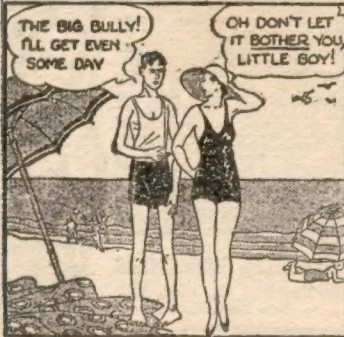
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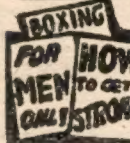
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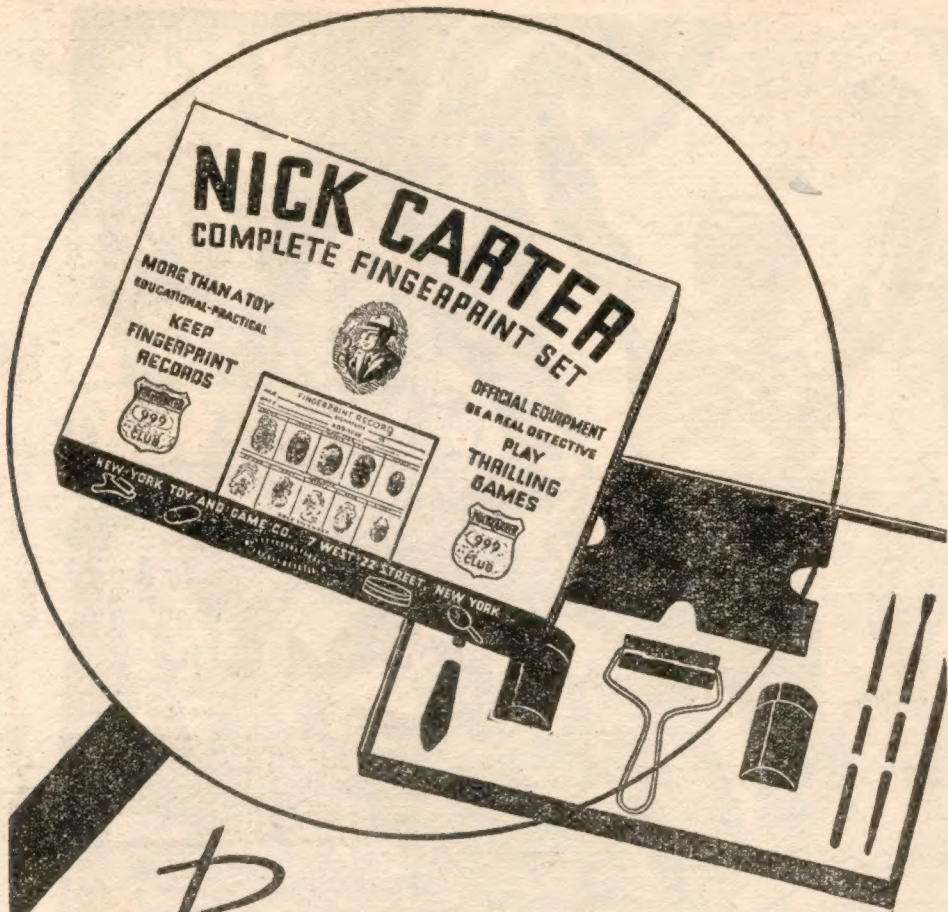
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But another pistol was discharged, from the edge of the curtain. Then the curtain was dashed aside, and from it leaped the hideous painted figure of Le Morpion, knife in hand.

A Gentleman Unknown

*Illustrated by
Paul Orban*

The story of a soldier who remembered

by H. BEDFORD-JONES

ON THE SIXTH day of February, 1816, a man of about thirty years walked into the liquor store of Mr. Henry Beer in Port Royal, Jamaica. This man was singularly handsome; that is to say, his features displayed such a quiet self-command, such an extraordinary depth of character, as to mark him out from others. His military carriage revealed the soldier. His rich but sober apparel hinted at wealth. His lower jaw was heavy. His eyes were large but very alert. There was one peculiar thing about his walk which no one observed, but which was of the greatest importance—his feet did not toe out. His footsteps in the dust made a perfectly straight line.

He walked up to Mr. Beer and spoke in a low voice: "I am Captain Louis Rion. Is there a gentleman here who has asked for me?"

Except for a number of slaves at work trundling rum barrels, the store was empty. Mr. Beer, who was a thick-set, surly sort of man, bowed obsequiously.

"Yes, indeed, sir. Will it please your honor to follow me? He is in the back room, sir."

Captain Rion followed him to the back room.

This was one of the very few buildings in Port Royal which had not been destroyed by the great fire of the previous July. The back room was large; so large that it was impossible for eavesdroppers to catch the words of any one sitting at the center table, speaking softly.

A man sat there, who rose and bowed profoundly at the approach of Rion. He was a burly, pock-marked fellow, with a certain blunt frankness in his face; from his garb, a shipman. In his ears dangled gold rings. Yet he wore a blazing diamond ring on his left hand.

"Captain Rion, your servant!" he exclaimed. "I am John Williams, master of the bark——"

"I had your letter," broke in Captain Rion, seating himself. His air was cold. "I should have turned your letter and you over to the authorities, no doubt."

"Aye, to see me swing on Gallows Hill," said Williams grimly.

"Exactly!" Rion surveyed him critically. "I am at a loss to understand why you approach me, why you have the audacity to ask me to meet you on such an errand."

"You are a gentleman, sir," said Williams, looking him in the eye. "You took part in the capture of Guadeloupe

by the British forces last summer. The Martiniere family entertained you, therefore you have an interest in saving the two young ladies of this family who are now in the hands of the Monte Cristi pirates. I can show you how to save them."

"If it is a matter of ransom——"

"It is not. Le Bossue never ransoms those he has taken."

Captain Rion remained silent. Le Bossue, whose name had been Anglicized into the "Bos'n" in general parlance, had organized at Monte Cristi, on the Haitian coast, a nest of pirates whose ferocity outdid the excesses of the buccaners.

"The two Martiniere daughters are at Monte Cristi, unharmed," said Williams. "If you will come there, you may take them away freely."

Captain Rion smiled slightly. "Why do you thus try to entrap a mere captain in the British army? At Kingston you could find wealthy men, officers of high birth——"

"It is not a trap, sir," Williams interposed with a certain dignity. "I have been asked to give you every assurance of this fact."

"Your word of honor, perhaps?"

Williams ignored the ironic words. "My master has sent you a private message."

"I have nothing to do with the Bos'n," Captain Rion said coldly. "Your effrontery in seeking me is only equaled by your amazing credulity in thinking I would have anything to do with you. You have no earthly reason to suppose that——"

"But there is a reason, sir," Williams broke in.

"What is it?"

"I do not know. My master said that you would understand when you saw his message."

Captain Rion regarded the frank, bluff features with a penetrating look.

"Besides," went on Williams, "my

master is not the Bos'n as you suppose. Le Bossue obeys another person in Monte Cristi, a person who is the real organizer, the real head, of that place. No one except Le Bossue and one or two others knows this fact."

"Who is this mysterious person?" asked Captain Rion with quiet scorn.

"His name?" Williams made an expressive gesture. "What do names matter? He is known as Monsieur l'Ombre. He is a man of about sixty and has enormous influence everywhere. It is said that King Henry Chairstophe, who rules half Haiti, does exactly as Monsieur l'Ombre says."

"Pshaw! That Negro potentate, with his buffoonery of nobility and imitation pomp——"

"Who destroyed the finest armies of Napoleon."

Captain Rion compressed his lips. "Come! Enough of this. Why were you sent to me?"

"Because Monsieur l'Ombre wishes to see you, sir. For this reason he ordered the raid on Guadeloupe that carried off the Martiniere daughters."

"In order to see me?"

"Precisely! He instructed me to tell you all this. He knew that you were here in Jamaica, on leave. He believes that in order to save these two young women, you will come to him. For certain reasons, he is unable to come to you. He said that when I gave you the message, you would understand. I have been at great pains to preserve the message from the heat of the sun."

Captain Rion frowned. "Upon my word, sir, I incline to think you mad! What is this curious message?"

FROM beneath the table, Williams took a wooden box. He opened this box with a small key and shoved it across the table. The box was a foot long, six inches in width and depth.

"There, sir. Here is a knife, if you have none."

Captain Rion took out a parcel carefully wrapped in silks and paper. He cut the silk cords and removed repeated wrappings, then a thick layer of cotton. At last he brought to sight the heart of the package—apparently nothing but a small doll.

For a moment Captain Rion stared at it. Then his face changed. He became pale as death, and lifted the thing, staring closely at it.

The figure was that of a boy, who wore the liberty cap of revolution days, and held in his hand a crucifix, apparently of silver. Every item of the figure was made of wax. Small as it was, its face was lifelike in the extreme. It was not hard to find a distinct resemblance to that of the man who stared at it.

"He told me to say," spoke up Williams, aware of the impression the image had made, "that the crucifix should be of crystal, but he failed to imitate it exactly."

At these words, a light perspiration started on the forehead of Captain Rion. However, his features showed no emotion, beyond a pronounced pallor, as he laid down the figure.

"Whom is this supposed to represent?" he demanded negligently.

"I know nothing about it." Williams evidently spoke the truth. "He said that either you would know, or you would not know; and that, if you knew you——"

Captain Rion seemed not to hear the words. He put the image on the floor and crushed it relentlessly, without emotion, very carefully. He crushed it under his heel until not an item of the original figure was recognizable.

"And that, if you knew," repeated Williams, "you would do just this."

Captain Rion lifted his head, then smiled slightly. "I believe your story," he said in a quiet, composed voice. "Unfortunately, although I am on leave for some months, until my return to Eng-

land, I am not entirely master of my own movements." His face became thoughtful, reflective. "How am I to reach Haiti?"

"My bark sails early in the morning, with the tide," said Williams. "I will have a boat waiting at the landing near the mole from midnight until dawn. If you can evade those who watch over you, the rest is simple."

Captain Rion regarded him fixedly. "How do you know that I must evade any one?"

"Monsieur l'Ombre said that this might be the case."

"He is apparently a man who foresees everything."

"That is true. He even sent me to Trinidad to obtain a man who would serve you."

"To Trinidad?"

"Yes. Fifty Iroquois Indians, who served with the British forces during the late war in America, were landed in Trinidad last August as colonists. They had chosen that island as their future home. One of them is now aboard my bark. He is named Scott, in English; but I have forgotten his French name."

Again Captain Rion had become pale. "Could it be Le Morpion?"

"Upon my word, sir, I think that is it! An elderly, silent fellow."

For a moment Captain Rion sat very still. Then, suddenly, he came to his feet.

"Sir, your servant," he said politely. "Two hours past midnight, I shall come to your boat. I advise you strongly not to let the authorities know of your connection with Monte Cristi. That is, unless you desire closer acquaintance with Gallows Hill."

Williams grinned. "Your advice, sir, is appreciated, but entirely needless."

II.

MONTE CRISTI, on the dividing line between black Haiti to the west

and brown Santo Domingo to the east, belonged to neither. No flag flew above Fort San Francisco. This remarkable fortress, perched on a hill-shoulder directly above the bay, commanded the shallow waters so thoroughly, and its cannon were of such size, that not even English frigates were at all tempted to try to dislodge the pirates from their lair.

The town itself lay a little back from the marshy flats of the shore. It was of astonishing size, having some thousands of inhabitants of all races, yellow, black, and white. Within the mole were grouped huge warehouses, batteries commanded the landing, and the dozen schooners and brigs, whose obvious armament had caused all this prosperity, were augmented by visiting craft whose owners were untroubled by scruples, but very anxious for bargains.

Slave barracoons lined the causeways to the town; many a cargo of black ivory bound for Havana had found a destination here. Up to the central plaza the buildings were a huddle of every conceivable kind. What had once been a stone church was now the palace of Le Bossue, cannon on the parapet, scarlet-clad blacks on guard.

Everywhere flowed humanity in uncontrolled masses. Sanitation was simple; corpses were cleared each morning from the streets and given to the sharks in the bay, but lesser evils were unregarded. There were no morals, no laws, no restraints, in Monte Cristi. On the higher ground behind the town was a great white building embedded in green gardens, also guarded by the scarlet-clad sentinels of Le Bossue.

Le Bossue himself, seated in the cool depths of his palace with his two chief captains, was such a figure as could only have been produced by the times. Until the preceding autumn, the West Indies had been ravaged by the worst of human passions let loose. Every nation had fought against every other nation;

blacks and whites had destroyed each other with appalling savagery; every standard of civilization had crashed to nothing. The fall of Napoleon had now restored peace, but its effects would be slow in reaching Monte Cristi and its population of utter depravity—a population at which the buccaneers of old-time would have stood aghast. The majority of these men had fallen from good estate and were hence the more vicious.

Le Bossue, who seemed proud of the title, was not exactly hunchbacked. True, a hump there was, and men touched it for luck if they dared, following the old superstition; but with this any deformity ended. The head was sunk slightly between the shoulders. Otherwise, Le Bossue had the strength of any other half dozen men, and ferocity to boot.

He did not look it. His olive features were handsome; he was smooth-shaven; his jet eyes and hair glowed with vitality. The long black hair was curled and perfumed. An oval, that face, never smiling except in cruelty; when Le Bossue smiled, he killed. His garments were of the richest, adorned with the finest lace, the bravest jewels.

Such was the man. Closer scrutiny would detect in that smooth oval face the marks of excesses, of animal passions, of a nature as unrestrained as that of a wild pig. But there was a surface veneer. And, withal, a certain craft. Not shrewdness, by a good deal—craft.

"You do not know the man, then?" asked Le Bossue, fingering his glass of wine.

"No," answered Captain Lenoir, his chief aid, a bristling Frenchman with huge mustachios, a good seaman, a man of high repute. "The orders are strict not to interfere with Williams. He took the man straight to the house of Monsieur l'Ombre."

A shadowy smile touched the lips of

Le Bossue. "You fear that man, Lenoir. But you, Harris—supposing I ordered you to break into his house and kill him?"

Harris fingered his mustache and grinned. He feared nothing, especially God, and looked the part with his sandy hair, his colorless but freckled skin, his bold jutting features, his pale eyes. A Yankee, they said, who had turned traitor in the late American war.

"Then, Bos'n," he replied with easy familiarity, "I should obey your orders. After first picking my men well."

Le Bossue laughed at this. There were few men in Monte Cristi who did not dread the "Shadow" like the very devil—or worse.

"It would be folly to kill him," said Lenoir seriously. "It is he who assures us the protection of King Christophe. Or rather, keeps Christophe from bothering us."

Harris, however, watched Le Bossue narrowly. He had not missed the shadowy smile a moment previously.

"As you very well know," Le Bossue said, "few of our men would move against Monsieur l'Ombre. They regard him with more fear than they do me or you. Christophe fears him. Every one in the whole island fears him. I fear him myself. But all this is coming to an end."

At this, the two pricked up their ears; Lenoir, in a startled manner, Harris, with an undisguised interest.

LE BOSSUE summoned a slave from the other end of the room. A graceful Spanish girl from a Cuban ship, she replenished the wine in silence; her eyes were dead. Le Bossue had many like her, who stayed a while and then went on to the town and so vanished.

Lenoir stole a glance at Harris, who fingered his mustache after his accustomed habit. Each of them understood. Le Bossue had been sulky ever since

those two French girls from the Guadeloupe raid had been taken straight to the white building up above.

"He has a brain, that Shadow," muttered Lenoir.

"True!" Le Bossue sipped at his wine delicately. "But when the body is dead, there is no longer a brain. The man is dying. Within a day or two or three, he will be dead."

"Ah!" ejaculated Harris and licked his lips. His pale, deadly eyes narrowed and glittered.

Le Bossue, who understood him perfectly, gave him a lingering glance. "No; you are wrong. None of his wealth, none of the vast sums he has taken, are in that house, my good Harris. They are all out in bills of exchange, with bankers abroad. We shall not profit by his money. But—you both know why he is feared."

They nodded. No money, no slaves; the old man kept no slaves.

"That is why I summoned you here, you two. There are five guards always at the white house; five, no more. When the time comes, they must be killed—quickly and silently. No talk later on. You, Harris, will pick a dozen men on whom you can rely."

Harris nodded quietly.

"Scatter the ships, send them out to cruise with all the men available," went on Le Bossue. "Let them depart tonight. Leave only my own brig in the harbor. You, Lenoir, will assume charge of the fort and batteries and of this palace. Harris and I will act together."

Lenoir emptied his glass to conceal his relief.

"So much precaution," commented Harris cynically, "against an old man guarded only by five blacks!"

"And by the devil," added Le Bossue. "Yet, when he is dead, we need not fear the devil. Then, indeed, they will all be mine to use."

"Can you use them?" Harris asked, with a curious glance.

Le Bossue reluctantly shook his head. "Not as he does. They will not talk for me. However, I can use them. When the time comes, I shall do so; and it will come very soon."

"How do you know?" demanded Lenoir.

Le Bossue's eyes narrowed. "The cook of Monsieur l'Ombre is in my pay, is working for me. She dare do nothing against him, but she watches. Yesterday she sent word that he was close to death, but recovered. She will let me know instantly a fatal attack comes. Now to business."

He called for more wine, which the girl brought. Le Bossue moved his arm, struck her across the body, ordered her out of the room. Then he looked at his companions.

"Harris, you and I will go to his house. I will take charge there. You are to get rid of the five blacks, and then put your men on guard about the grounds. Not a soul there is to remain alive."

"Not even the two French girls?" queried Harris with a leer.

"I will take care of them. They do not concern you."

Harris nodded and twisted his reddish mustache. "Still," he observed, "I should like to put a bullet into that General Washington!"

"Then I will put ten bullets into you," Le Bossue said, with so intent a look that for a moment Harris lost countenance. "The corridors are not to be disturbed, not one of those figures is to be touched. Understand? Good! Now, back to the point, my friends. Who is the man just arrived? Why has Monsieur l'Ombre been expecting him for weeks past?"

"Bah! He seems like an ordinary man," grunted Lenoir. "Williams must know; but not a soul aboard his ship seems to have any information."

"There is a second man, who remained aboard the bark," put in Captain Harris. "A servant of some kind, who speaks French and English. A queer brown man, they say; those of the crew are afraid of him. He is called Le Morpion, but has an English name also."

"Odd!" mused Le Bossue and lifted his glass. "Your health! Now I can tell you what you both have missed. I watched that man walking up to Monsieur l'Ombre's house with Williams. I had my spyglass. I noticed something and sent a man to observe the tracks in the sand. Well, he does not walk like other men, that one. His feet move in a straight line. His tracks, therefore, are in a direct line in the sand. Why should this be, unless the devil is in him? I cannot explain it."

"Perhaps," Lenoir suggested quite seriously, "he is really the devil."

Harris erupted a startled oath, then broke into a sudden roar of laughter. "Egad, I have the reason!" he exclaimed. "We used to walk that way as boys, back in—well, never mind where. Back in New England. Indian-fashion, we called it; the Red Indians walk that way. If one can do it in the woods, he does not go in a circle, but straight. This man is an Indian."

"No; for he is white," said Le Bossue.

"Bah! A Canadian, then; no matter. An Indian, eh? That is queer." Harris broke off and glanced up.

Le Bossue turned.

Two men came into the room, carrying a box between them. One of the scarlet-clad guards advanced and in his Creole jargon explained that a package had come from Monsieur l'Ombre. The three men at the table exchanged a glance.

"One of his cursed jokes," muttered Le Bossue uneasily. "Open it, Harris."

He sent the others from the room.

Harris went to the box, which had a hinged lid, and opened it. He brought out a large object carefully wrapped in cloth. When this was removed, a human head was exposed.

It was the life-sized head of Harris himself, so exquisitely modeled in wax as to seem—no, not alive. The eyes were closed. The pallor of death was on that face, and between the eyes was the blue mark of a bullet.

Captain Harris cursed. He broke into a perfect storm of profanity, heightened by the grin of Lenoir and the bitter comments of Le Bossue. Blasphemy sat on his lips; his fury rose into an overwhelming tide of passion. Suddenly he darted upon the wax head, drew a long pistol from his belt, and under a storm of blows from the butt the wax and its understructure of fabric collapsed in an indistinguishable mass.

But Le Bossue's jet eyes regarded him thoughtfully and with a touch of fear.

III.

THE MAN who called himself Monsieur l'Ombre was an old man. But not a gentle old man. Captain Rion regarded him with interest and avid curiosity. For once, he beheld a man whom he could not comprehend.

Williams had talked a good deal, his tongue evidently being quite free. Captain Rion had kept his eyes open all the way from the mole up to the town, and through it, on to this hillside building. He had learned a great deal, except what he most wanted to know.

The building had seemed large, yet the rooms in which he found himself were small. All the doors stood open for air. He could see all the rooms—the black woman at work in the kitchen, the two bedrooms, the library walled with books, the reception room in which he stood with Williams and his scarlet-clad guard. Then the old man, leaning on a stick, who approached, sent the

guard away, then sent Williams away after him.

The old man bowed; then the two stood looking at each other, silent for a moment.

A strange man, this! Wasted by illness, the unmistakable pallor of death in his shrunken face. One could fancy what that face, framed in a powdered wig, must have been; proud and masterful, relentless, implacable. Even now it conveyed a strange sneering strength as though the wasted body gripped the soul despite itself and would not let go.

"You are Captain Rion?" The voice was deep and hard. "I am Monsieur Charles Piloton, the banker. This is the first time I have spoken my name in twenty years, monsieur. Or, should I say, your highness?"

Captain Rion bowed slightly. His face was quite inscrutable. "I fear, monsieur, that you labor under a misapprehension," he said quietly. "My sole title is that of captain in the armies of his majesty. I am a Canadian."

"From the village of Beauharnois, I believe?"

"Exactly!" said Captain Rion, regarding his host steadily.

The old man smiled, and indicated a chair. "Will you have the goodness to be seated? I am very close to the end; it is difficult for me to stand any length of time. And I have much to do."

Captain Rion hesitated. Then, seeing that the other would not first sit down, he took a chair. Piloton, as he named himself, flung out a word in patois, and the door of the kitchen was instantly closed.

"I believe," said Captain Rion, "that I was brought here in order to see——"

"The Martiniere sisters. They are in the garden. Our business is more important." The old man, who was dressed all in black, relaxed in his chair, put his stick across his knees. His piercing eyes dwelt upon his visitor. "Yes; I see there is no mistake. My agents

have informed me correctly. Even after twenty years—— But you do not remember me?"

"I do not," said Captain Rion.

"True; you were only nine years old then—or was it ten?"

Captain Rion frowned slightly, as though irritated by so palpable a trap.

"That day—it was just after the ninth Thermidor—when I accompanied Barras to the temple," went on the other. "By the way, you recognized the clothes of the wax boy?"

"How long are we to spar with words?" demanded the visitor coldly.

"Until you understand what I say," was the calm response. "Will it bore you, monsieur, if I speak of myself?"

"If you speak of yourself—no," said Captain Rion rather stiffly.

"Good! I was a banker, yes. Also, I was in love with Marie Grosholtz, and with her was instructed by her uncle, Dr. Curtius, in the curious art of making wax figures. Alas, she married another, and as Madame Tussaud is now in London; and I am dead. It was Barras who killed me and all my family."

To this astonishing statement Captain Rion made no response.

The other went on: "I bribed Barras; therefore he killed me, do you understand? Or thought that he did. I bribed him; he took bribes from every one, after he killed Robespierre. In fact, Robespierre had discovered his corruption and was on the point of sending him to the guillotine, when he acted first. A sharp one, that Barras! Well, he took my money, and his mistress did the work. You know what work I refer to, monsieur."

"I regret," said Captain Rion, "that I cannot imagine to what you refer."

"To the carrying off of a certain boy, who was a prisoner," said the old man. "Alas, I was a guilty agent! For his uncle wanted him out of the way, and, instead of restoring him to his rightful

place, sent him to Canada, where he was adopted under a new name. Then Barras, to shut my mouth, killed me. I got away. I fled. His arm, and that of Louis XVIII, could reach across the world. I never mentioned my real name again until to-day, monsieur."

With polite interest, Captain Rion inclined his head, but made no comment.

"Now," the other continued, "the time has come for me to make restitution, to repair the wrong that I did this unhappy boy. Here, monsieur." He extended a sealed packet, which Captain Rion took with a glance of inquiry. "That contains bills of exchange; I am a wealthy man, and with this wealth I hope to atone in some small way——"

"Really," and Captain Rion tapped the packet frowningly, "I fear that you are making a very sad mistake, monsieur."

Piloton smiled thinly at him. "I am not in the habit of making mistakes. One of my agents reported to me that during the campaign in America you carried the only one of your baptismal gifts still remaining to you—a certain crucifix of crystal. I see you are a trifle ill at ease. Will you take one of those cigars in the box at your elbow? They were made for King Christophe, of the very finest Havana leaf. I think you will enjoy them."

AS CAPTAIN RION smoked, he took one of the cigars, which were indeed superb. The sealed packet he laid on his knee. When the cigar was alight, he tapped the packet again. "In regard to this, Monsieur Piloton——"

"You will honor me by keeping it. Now, look you! I knew very well that nothing could induce you to come here—except one thing. Recognition, together with the opportunity to save those two lovely girls. You are a gentleman, monsieur; indeed, you are the first gentleman of France. And knowing that my days were numbered, I

longed with all my heart to see you face to face, to atone in person for the wrong that I once did you——”

As though the interview was distasteful to him, Captain Rion left his chair and crossed the room to a window that overlooked the garden. Then he turned. “My dear sir, will you have the kindness to tell me for whom you mistake me?”

“I do not mistake you, monsieur,” said Piloton calmly. “You were the Dauphin of France; you are Louis XVII. Do you deny it, on your word of honor?”

Captain Rion made an impatient gesture. “Monsieur, I cannot imagine what can have inspired you with this delusion!” he said sharply. “I am Captain Louis Rion——”

“Louis Charles, I think?”

“Yes. I am nothing else. I will never be anything else, upon my word of honor.”

For a moment Piloton sat in silence. Then he sighed. “I understand; an evasion, a noble evasion! Well, monsieur, you are a man and not a child. I do not inquire into your reasons. Will you, Captain Rion, keep that packet?”

“If it will gratify you, I will keep it,” said Captain Rion slowly.

“Thank you. In the morning, Captain Williams returns to escort you and the young ladies to his ship, and wherever you may wish to go. The afternoon is wearing on. First, let me show you the corridors of my house, which will explain many things to you. Then we may meet the young ladies, who know nothing of my secrets. Or would you prefer to meet them now? In that case, I might rest before taking you over my house——”

“Rest, by all means,” said Captain Rion, advancing as the old man rose. “May I offer you my arm?”

“Thank you; I am used to the stick. Very well! Go into the garden by that window, and you will find them. To-

night I shall show you the corridors.”

Captain Rion bowed, turned to the window, and, opening the long sash, stepped out into the garden.

Once free of the house, he drew a long breath and flung away the cigar. He halted and with his handkerchief mopped the perspiration from his forehead. His pallor was banished by the warmth and sunlight; in a moment he was himself again. But he looked older, as though he had just emerged from an ordeal of the most trying kind.

The gardens were very thick with all manner of subtropical plants. A high wall hemmed them in; by following the paths strewn with broken shell, Captain Rion at length glimpsed a fountain and a shaded bower where two young women were talking. At his advance, they looked up, then, with joyful exclamations, they were greeting him excitedly.

“He said you would come to-day!” cried Lucie, the elder of the two. “Why, Captain Rion, it seems like a dream! To think of saying good-by to you in Guadeloupe, and then——”

Marie, the younger, broke in with babbling words. “Their delight, their shining eyes, their laughter, rejoiced the heart of Captain Rion. Between him and them was a real affection, untempered by any personal feelings; in Guadeloupe, he had known them and their family very closely, having been billeted in the Martiniere mansion. They were unaffected, charming girls, with the frank warmth of Creoles and the culture of old France, and Captain Rion foresaw a very pleasant few weeks ahead, before their next parting.

But he did not foresee the happenings of this night.

IV.

DINNER was over. The two young women had retired to their own room to get an early sleep before the dawn

and departure. Piloton and his guest sat talking over their wine and cigars.

Suddenly the house trembled. The candles quivered; one fell from its socket. From the black woman in the kitchen burst a cry of alarm. Captain Rion started to his feet, but Piloton only smiled.

"A slight earth tremor, monsieur. They are frequent, but never dangerous. Besides, I constructed the house very carefully to withstand such things. It is all of wood, built so that it will yield. A masonry or coral house is shaken to pieces, but this one is not. Well, may I request you to sit comfortably for a few minutes until I arrange the lights? My man, who once did these things, died last year, and I have not replaced him."

Captain Rion nodded. He was curious about what was to follow.

On a table at one side stood a large wicker holder, in which were many candle-lamps. The cook had just finished lighting them. Piloton, leaning on his stick, caught up the holder in his free hand and shuffled out of the room. Captain Rion, looking after him, suddenly realized the man's feebleness and half started from his chair. Then he sank back. No. Piloton evidently wanted to carry those lights himself and arrange—what?

Piloton was gone for some time. When he returned, he dropped into a chair; his face was very white. He waved aside Captain Rion's questions; the indomitable will of the man forced a laugh to his lips.

"Nothing; a slight attack. It comes and goes. A glass of wine, and then I am——"

Presently he rose and asked Captain Rion to accompany him. He led the way to a massive door at one side of the reception room; it stood open. Down a dozen steps, then along a paved corridor which twisted about and was very cool.

"Monsieur, I scorn to be anything but honest with you," Piloton said, pausing. Ahead, lamps glimmered from hooks, lighting recesses in the wall of the corridor. "As I told you, I learned this art from Dr. Curtius, who invented it. By the gift of ventriloquism, I have in a very obvious manner made myself feared and respected in this land. On my last trip to Cap-Haitien, I took the head of Toussaint L'Ouverture to King Christophe; that head spoke to the king. You comprehend? These poor fools take me for the devil in person. Well, come!"

Thus Captain Rion viewed the wax figures of Monsieur l'Ombre, single figures or pairs, set in recesses of the corridor. Some of them horrible to see, others interesting, all of them lifelike in the extreme and clad as in life. The garments were real, and not of wax as in the case of the tiny figure which Williams had delivered.

It was not hard to guess what could be done in this country by a man possessed of these figures and the gift of throwing his voice unseen. Their extremely lifelike aspect was startling. Here were the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, the American Revolution, the French Revolution; in all, a score and more of groups or single figures, the size of life.

Piloton halted before the lone shape of Robespierre, shown sitting at a table in the act of writing. A dry chuckle broke from him as he pointed.

"Monsieur, you must regard this. History tells us that Robespierre was guillotined. That is untrue. He was shot by an assassin sent by Barras; shot in the very act of signing a proclamation calling the people to arms. There on that paper are his very words; he has begun to sign his name; it is the instant when the assassin shot him. The original of that document is in existence, spattered with the blood of Robespierre. Had the assassin delayed but a few min-

utes, Robespierre would have lived, Barras would have been arrested, the whole course of history would have been altered. But there remains one more group you have not seen."

He drew his guest on to the next niche, the largest of all. The corridor had doubled back, so that this niche was close to the stairs and the entrance door. Captain Rion looked at the three figures before him. They represented Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, and the Princess de Lamballe, all in court attire. Behind these figures was a heavy red velvet curtain.

After a silent moment, Piloton turned. "Monsieur, would you gratify an old man who is dying? Then, I implore you, let me see you wearing that wig, those clothes!"

"No!" Captain Rion started back. "Good Heaven, no! Why are you so determined to make me seem what I am not?"

"But, monsieur, why do you refuse to appear what you are?"

"Because I have so agreed, have so passed my word——" Captain Rion checked himself abruptly. "Because I have no desire to lay claim to a name and rank which I neither need nor wish."

The other sighed. "Well, monsieur, I understand; let it be forgotten. You see that red velvet curtain? It conceals a wide arch, which is the entrance to my workshop. This portion of the building is cooled by icy mountain water, which I have piped down from Monte Cristi above. Thus, even in the heat of summer, my wax remains——"

SUDDENLY his words failed. Then his voice became only a singular whistling noise. He put out a hand to the wall; the stick fell and clattered on the stone underfoot. Captain Rion, swinging around, was in time to catch the old man as he collapsed.

TN-2

"It—it is the end," whispered Piloton. "Send—send——"

His breath died away. Captain Rion lifted the shrunken body, ascended the steps to the reception room, and placed the unconscious man on a divan there. The black woman was in the dining room. He called harshly to her:

"Come here, quickly! He is dying!"

The Negress came into the doorway, understood his words, caught sight of the figure on the couch. She uttered one wild cry, then turned and ran out of the place. With an angry oath, Rion darted into the dining room, caught up a decanter of wine, and returned with it. He poured a few drops between the livid lips.

Piloton swallowed. He was not dead after all.

After a moment, Captain Rion rose. He knew the bedroom occupied by the two Martinieri sisters, hastened to it, knocked sharply at the door. A voice replied.

"It is Captain Rion. Get up, dress, come and help me! Our host is dying, I fear. That accursed cook has fled."

She had fled indeed. Farther and faster than Captain Rion knew.

He came back to the couch of the dying man. No other servants, except the guards outside; those black statues were useless. Piloton's heart was fluttering, his eyes were closed. Captain Rion knelt, poured more wine between his lips. No response.

There came a repeated knock at the entrance door. Captain Rion rose, went to it, and opened the foot-square panel in the door. Outside, under the light, was a guard, with an indistinct figure behind him.

"M'soo," said the black soldier in his patois, "a man sent by Captain Williams. Where is Monsieur l'Ombre?"

"He is busy." Captain Rion caught a grunt from the figure behind and hastily unbarred the door. "Ah, Le Morpion! Is it you?"

"Yes," replied the Iroquois. "I was sent here to take care of you. The ships are all going out. The captain said to tell Monsieur l'Ombre."

"Go and tell him," said Captain Rion, admitting the old warrior, who wore, as usual, the scarlet coat of a British soldier. The black guard objected to the entry without word from Monsieur l'Ombre. Captain Rion silenced him, and at length he strode back to his post, with a grumble only half silenced by a gold piece.

All this took time.

When Captain Rion returned to the reception room, he saw the two girls beside the couch. Le Morpion stood at one side, impassive, arms folded, bronze features shielded by his three-cornered hat of a bygone style. This man had known Captain Rion in Canada, as a boy, had been his companion in many a woods trail.

"Oh! He is trying to speak!" murmured Lucie Martinier. "Let me lift his head——"

"No; let me."

Captain Rion raised the old man's head in his arms. Piloton had opened his eyes and was, indeed, trying to speak, but could not. His fingers feebly pressed the hand of Lucie. Then his eyes closed again. He was still breathing.

Captain Rion placed a pillow under his head, rose, and turned to Le Morpion with a look of inquiry.

The impassive Iroquois spoke in English: "The captain is uneasy. Men have been coming out to the other ships; they are leaving. He has a boat waiting at the mole in case you must come at any time. The breeze is offshore, and he can leave. All the town is like a hive of bees."

Captain Rion shrugged, hesitated, then turned back again to the dying man.

He was well aware that, with Piloton dead, the safest place for all of them

would be aboard the bark of Williams. That there was any emergency, he did not imagine. His host had spoken of the scarlet-clad guards, in the course of dinner; those men were faithful to him, bound by a fear greater than that of death.

FROM the corner of his eye, Captain Rion saw the impassive Iroquois produce brass pistols—Rion's pistols—and, after carefully renewing the priming, lay them on a table. Beneath the scarlet coat, he knew, were the long knife and the little ax which never left the side of the Indian except for use. Presently Le Morpion caught his eye, gestured, and he crossed to the silent shape.

"My spirit tells me," said the Iroquois in French, "that black belts have been sent out. On the way here we met a woman running toward town. My guide left me, and I came on alone. The trail is not good."

A woman, running! Captain Rion recollected the black cook and frowned. He knew the strength of that peculiar sixth sense, that intuition which the Iroquois called his spirit; if Le Morpion scented trouble, perhaps he was right. News of Piloton's death might well cause things to happen. Captain Rion cursed that fleeing cook.

"We cannot leave now," he said and returned to the couch.

Lucie, a cloak about her half-clad figure, was holding up the head of Piloton.

Le Morpion took off his hat and revealed a skull that was shaven except for his graying scalp lock. From under his coat he produced a pouch; then his eyes glittered around the room in search of something. With a perfectly silent step, he moved about, and after a moment was gone into another room.

The eyes of the old man on the couch had opened again. He looked up, saw Captain Rion, and a smile touched his

lips. Rion leaned over and took his hand. Piloton weakly carried the fingers of Rion to his mouth, and kissed them.

"You must have medicine here," said Captain Rion. "Can you tell us where it is?"

"No," the old man breathed. "Useless. Send—send——"

For the second time, this phrase he was trying to utter remained unspoken. Abruptly, a convulsion seized him. His features became purple, his eyes closed. His fingers clenched upon those of Captain Rion. Suddenly they relaxed. A shiver seized upon Lucie; she gently let his head down upon the pillow.

"You are right," said Captain Rion sadly. "He has passed. Go quickly, get into your clothes, bring anything you want! We must leave here without a moment's delay."

His sudden change of tone startled the two young women. They rose, staring at him, and then withdrew. Alone, Captain Rion fell to one knee; for a moment his lips moved silently, his eyes were closed. Then he came to his feet again.

"Farewell!" he said to the figure before him. "A prayer is all I can do for you; who knows? Perhaps it is the most that could be desired."

He remembered Le Morpion and glanced around. Stepping into the dining room, he saw the Iroquois standing there before a long mirror, stripped to the waist. With white and red paint from his pouch, which he had dissolved in a wineglass, Le Morpion was just finishing the work of painting his face and breast in a hideous design.

"We must go," Captain Rion said.

Le Morpion closed his pouch, passed its thong over his head. Suddenly he swung around, his eyes blazing. "The candles!" he exclaimed. "Put them out!"

At this instant Captain Rion heard a choked cry from outside. The Iroquois

dashed at the candles; the room was plunged into darkness.

Captain Rion, in alarm, extinguished those of the outer room. A faint light came from the open door of the corridor of the wax figures. Somewhere there was a crash of glass; a window had been broken in. A heavy weight tried the entrance door, but it was bolted.

"Around the house," came a voice, faintly but distinctly, from outside. "In at the windows, Harris!"

Another glass tinkled into fragments. There was a sharp cry, then Lucie Martiniere came running, followed by her sister. Captain Rion caught up the pistols from the table. Too late, too late!

Again came the voice from outside, vibrant, powerful—the voice of Le Bossue, now rising in confident triumph: "Do not hurt the women, you dogs! They are mine!"

Too late, indeed! From somewhere, with another crash of glass, a figure came reeling and gasping through the obscurity. It was one of the scarlet-clad guards, crying out the name of Monsieur l'Ombre. He fell at the doorway of the girls' bedroom, in the light that came from the candles there, and whimpered as he died. The haft of a knife stood out from his back.

Then men came bursting in upon the darkness, with curses and weapons. But Captain Rion and his companions were not there.

V.

LIGHTS were blazing again in all the candelabra. Half a dozen men stood in the outer room, staring about half fearfully. The search had revealed none except the dead.

The door of the corridors, into which no one had ventured, stood open an inch or two. By it was Le Bossue, in talk with Captain Harris.

"I don't want the men in there," said Le Bossue.

"Neither do they," and Harris laughed. "They've heard too much about it."

"The women must be there or in the workshop," Le Bossue said with an oath. "Also, the two men. Why did that fellow's servant come up from the ship?"

"Ask him," said Harris ironically, and waved his hand at the door. "Is it possible that you, Le Bossue, hesitate to enter this place where the dead can speak?"

The hunchback growled an oath. "You prate too much. Go in and drive out the rats."

"Willingly," and Harris coolly primed a pistol.

Le Bossue caught his arm. "Remember! Don't lay a finger on those wax figures!"

Captain Harris merely shrugged, jerked open the door, and passed down the steps. The glow of the lamps arose faintly. The men standing in the reception room, their weapons still red with the blood of the five guards, drew closer together. They were utter ruffians, lowest of the low. They knew no fear, but they were in dread all the same.

Le Bossue lighted one of Piloton's cigars as he waited.

A burst of laughter came from Harris, invisible. His steps, reverberating from the corridors, came clearly through the doorway. Presently his mocking voice rose: "All right, Bos'n! The birds didn't run this way. Not a sign of them."

"Did you go into the workshop?"

"I looked in there, at least. Better go through the closets and the gardens."

Le Bossue whirled on his men furiously. He bade them join the others outside, after another thorough search of the house, and comb every corner of the gardens with lights. Then he turned to the doorway and descended the steps.

"Harris! Where are you?"

Captain Harris appeared at his side, laughing "Come, Bos'n, let me guide you about—two sous, honest sir, for a good guide!" he whined. "Devil take me if these are anything more than life-sized dolls, after all. As to their talking, there's some trick about it."

"Perhaps," said Le Bossue, but there was a queer look in his eyes.

The two men, hands on pistols, sauntered along the twisting corridor.

"What have you done about Williams and his bark?" asked Captain Harris.

"Nothing. He's nothing to do but throw in with us, now that the Shadow is dead. Are you sure they're not hiding in the workshop? You know where it is?"

"Yes. Nothing but some half-finished figures there and no hiding place. Ah!" Harris came to a halt as they arrived at the large group. He pointed to the Princess de Lamballe. "Her wig has come loose, eh? Here, my good Bos'n. I've a fancy to see how these creatures are made." He stepped into the niche as he spoke and approached the figure of the princess, stretching out his arm toward her.

He was checked by a terrible cry from Le Bossue and whirled about. The figure of Louis XVI had moved slightly—was speaking.

"You scoundrel!"

Le Bossue turned and rushed for the stairs. He caught his foot, fell heavily on his face. But Captain Harris was made of different stuff. True, he turned livid with fear, but an oath came to his lips.

"In that case, king, try if a bullet will help you!" he cried, and lifted his pistol.

Another was discharged, from the edge of the velvet curtain—a pistol that flashed up into sight and roared its message. The curtain was dashed aside. From it leaped the hideous painted figure of Le Morpion, knife in hand.

Captain Harris had fallen backward in the corridor, a small blue mark between his eyes. Over him leaped the Iroquois—over him, and after the tall figure scrambling up the stairs.

Behind, Captain Rion, now in the garb of Louis XVI., caught the queen and the princess in his arms, checked their cries hastily.

"Out of here!" he exclaimed. "Quickly! It is our one chance—be bold!"

In the reception room above, a terrible scene was taking place.

A number of the men were there, poking about the place, when the appearance of Le Bossue transfixed them. Through the doorway burst the hunchback, an incoherent babble on his lips. Then, behind him, came the soundless, painted shape of Le Morpion like a frightful apparition.

LE BOSSUE turned his head and saw the Iroquois. A scream burst from his lips. Then Le Morpion was upon him, the long knife driving down, flashing scarlet, and driving home again. Le Bossue pitched forward on his face, knocking over a candelabrum.

"Sassakway! Sassakway!"

It was the appalling war whoop of the Iroquois, a scream like that of a tortured fiend. And with it, Le Mor-

pion hurled himself at the nearest of the paralyzed men, and his dripping knife went home.

That was enough. With one accord, the others flung down their weapons and took to mad flight. Their voices wailed upon the night as they struggled to get away, to get into the garden, anywhere. Their panic was communicated to the others. News that Le Bossue was dead flashed from mouth to mouth. When they paused to look back, a red glow permeated the house. Flames from the fallen candles had caught the draperies, and instantly fire was licking at the walls, the doors, the ceilings.

When Captain Rion and his three companions emerged into the night, the hoarse screams of men were heard ahead of them, into and through the town. He glanced back at the house, where flames were crackling, then shook his head.

"Why did he want me to wear these garments?" he muttered. "It was that which put it into my head—but why?"

One of the two women stumbled. He caught her up, and laughed suddenly.

"No panic, ladies, no panic! I fancy we'll find a clear road ahead of us. Scout the trail, comrade!"

The whoop of the Iroquois made answer, as the leaping painted figure flitted through the moonlight.

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*Illustrated
by
G. H. Wert*

THE SLENDER young Mexican leaned in the saddle and spoke softly in the little blue horse's ear. "*Mira, mi Azulito!* Your business is to watch yonder *matorral* for cattle—not moon-gaze into the valley where idlers ride for pleasure. *Sabe, estupid?*"

Azulito cocked an ear at the chiding voice and lifted curious eyes from two midget horsemen who crawled along the misty floor of the Nueces valley. He had been standing there—hardly shifting a muscle under his master's weight—since before dawn, and he was chilled and cramped all through.

VAQUERO

by William Lester

He started to say as much in a querulous little nicker, but a sharp twitch of the romal cut his remonstrance short. Resigned then, he settled himself once more to his vigil, so still that he and his leather-clad rider might have been a statue set there in the eternal solitude of the hills.

Azulito's master was a vaquero—a brush-popper for the great Rey del Sul estancia. Ygenio Segoya's work was hunting the renegade cattle that escaped the rodeos and found asylum in the thorned bosques and *matorrals* that covered the tumbled hills of the Nueces range. For every calf marked with the Crown brand he received fifty cents; for grown ladinos caught and delivered to the headquarters pasture one dollar. Some months he made as much as twenty-five dollars—and twenty-five pesos Americano is a great deal of money.

So much afforded Azulito a feed of grain each day; it allowed Ygenio to smoke American *cigarillos*, besides having white sugar in his coffee; more important yet, it bought ribbons and shawls and silver bracelets for little Serafina Sais.

Serafina's share of the monthly earnings was many times greater than Azulito's and Ygenio's combined; but Azulito was content with his grain, and Ygenio, of course, was in love.

Once a month Ygenio rode to Pueblo Roma bearing his gifts. If there was

no *baile* to be danced with Serafina there was a whole evening's rapture in watching her shadowy beauty as she sang sad and tender little *canzones* to him in the moonlit patio of Don Sais' grand house. During the hard days between visits he had the memory of kisses and whispered promises and, always, the companionship of Azulito, the friend of his heart.

Altogether Ygenio was very happy. Only at times—in periods of long waiting such as this morning—did doubt invade his mind. The squat figure of Don Tomas Sais, Serafina's father, sometimes reared itself in the path of his dreams. Don Sais was proprietor of the only store in Pueblo Roma and, by common report, possessed of a great *avaricia*. What would he say, Ygenio wondered, to a *yerno* who owned no more than a few mustangs and lived under the sky?

The sun slowly bent over Ygenio's head and filtered pale light into the dark recesses of the jungle. Momentarily the silence tightened. Then somewhere in the brush a body stirred stealthily. Azulito's skin rippled nervously on his rigid body. All at once a great tawny-colored steer stood in a checkered patch of sunlight at the end of a narrow runway.

Infinitely alert it was, so lightly poised that its bulk seemed scarcely to weight the ground. Its shaggy-bossed head was flung back so that the flaring,

dagger-tipped horns lay close to its bony withers. It was still only an instant as it turned its moist black muzzle slowly to test the air; then terror filled its wild eyes. A blast of alarm; a single catlike bound; the clearing was empty again.

Azulito launched himself into a run. Ygenio, holding an uncoiled reata under his thigh, dropped lengthwise along the saddle. Not a fraction of time too soon. Azulito struck the jungle wall like a bullet. With head carried low against the bullhide *cuella* that protected his breast and shoulders, he raced through all the clawed and thorned things that grew for the torment of man and beast.

He had no sight of the quarry, but followed the sound of flight. Snorts of terror, the clatter of split hoofs, the click of long horns on the unyielding boles of oak and mahogany, made a wild clamor in the stillness.

PRESENTLY the brushy growth thinned. Now, instead of black chaparral and *juajilla*, the ridge was studded thickly with wild ebony, evergreen and beautiful to look at, but with serried limbs, rigid and sharp as spear points. Here Ygenio really started to ride. He left Azulito to follow the cattle; he watched nothing but his own safety.

One moment he was upright, swaying, dodging and fending his face with both arms; the next he was dragging from the saddle with head barely clearing the ground. He was under and up and over the racing horse all at once, never escaping the deadly limbs by more than a hand's breadth.

All the while Azulito was gaining. As he broke through a clearing in sight, the little band of renegades split. A few scrawny cows with calves scattered and dropped behind; three or four young steers found the pace too hot and swerved aside. But Azulito's eyes were trained solely on the big buckskin leader.

It spurted out frantically, twisted and doubled to gain cover again, only to be countered at every move. Gradually the keen, smoke-blue head crept up on the straining flanks. Ygenio lifted himself in the stirrups and shook out the loop of his reata. And what followed then was marvelous to behold, a beautiful co-ordination of time and effort between the man and horse.

Ygenio opened the small loop with a single turn of his wrist. It played out and dropped precisely, just clearing the tips of each horn. A jerk tightened the loop, and he tossed the slack of the rope over the opposite flank of the steer. Simultaneously Azulito spun away at an acute angle to the animal's course, and Ygenio threw his weight to one side to balance his lighter weight.

Then the reata snapped taut between the two flying bodies. A terrific wrench; a groaning of saddle leather and strangled bawl; the steer upended itself and somersaulted in mid-air. Before it landed, almost, Azulito was whirling, braced against the reata; Ygenio was out of the saddle and running.

He fell on the heaving brute and swiftly gathered the flaying feet into the folds of his *peale*. His lean brown hands made magic moves with the pliant cord; then, mere seconds since he had thrown his loop, he straightened up from the bound outlaw.

He was clawed and brush-whipped from head to foot. Under the disreputable sombrero a pattern of welts and scratches showed on his dark face. His canvas *jaqueta* was ripped across his left shoulder disclosing a jagged streak of red on the smooth bronze of his skin.

But Ygenio smiled as he raised his eyes to Azulito. "*Doce, amigo,*" he called gayly. "Twelve prime ones and the month not yet half spent. Let the *Virgen Santisima* continue to favor us

and the beautiful Serafina will wear those *diamante* earrings she so desires."

Small sounds carried far in that country. The crashing of brush on the distant slope broke startlingly into the silence that enveloped the two men who rode the river trail. Soon the chase itself coursed into view, and the rider in the lead reined in.

Hugh Jannison, owner of the Rey del Sul grant, was a sportsman. To lead the hunt over a stiff jump on a frosty morning; to smash the ball down the polo field to victory—the thrill of such moments alone made life worth living. Now, as the wild race came to its whirlwind finish—as though purposely staged for his amusement—the bored look that had clouded his handsome face all morning lifted.

"Jove, that's somethin' worth seein'!" he exclaimed, envy mingling with admiration in his tone. "You know, Cotrell," he went on, "I've been about a bit—hunted in the stone-fence country in Ireland; taken my turn at pig-stickin' with the Britishers in India; but all that's tame sport compared to that bit of horse work."

The weathered features of Jannison's superintendent showed a faint quizzical smile. "I'm doubtful as to whether young Segoya would speak of it as sport," he said dryly. "He's one of the brush-poppers who helps the outfit pay your dividends, and he's just earned an even dollar by that neck-breaking exhibition you've seen."

"A difference in viewpoint is all," retorted Jannison, flushing as he caught the irony in Cotrell's reply. "It happens that circumstances force the Mexican to risk his neck in order to make a living, while I can afford to risk mine for pleasure. However, I'm not interested in him. Good horses are rare, and from what I saw of that roan pony's work I'd say he'd make a polo animal. I want to have a look at him."

YGENIO was at Azulito's head coiling his reata when the two rode up. His battered hat made a flourish of welcome.

"*Buenas dias, señores,*" he said, including the stranger in his grave smile.

"*Buenas dias, Ygenio,*" responded Cotrell with equal politeness. "That was a good catch you made before us."

"My Azulito is to be praised, señor," said Ygenio. "He is the best *caballito* on the Nueces."

"It is of him we would speak. This caballero with me is Señor Jannison. He is proprietor of all this estancia, and he greatly admires your horse."

"I am his humble *serviente,*" said Ygenio with another bow.

But Jannison missed his retainer's expression of homage, for he was swinging from his saddle. He strode past him to the little blue and began an examination with the firm, sure hands of a practiced horseman. All this Ygenio watched with pride. *El Patron* knew a horse; he could see that.

"He's young and sound—got good legs under him," said Jannison, turning to Cotrell. "What's a fair price to offer?"

"Prices vary," replied Cotrell briefly. "Ten or fifteen for most mustangs. Anywhere from twenty-five to fifty for a top rope horse like that."

"I want to be fair with the boy. Tell him I'll give him a hundred."

Ygenio smiled when Cotrell translated the offer. He had never possessed more than thirty dollars at any one time, and the sum conveyed little to him except that *El Patron* complimented him by desiring Azulito. It made him like the *Americano grande* all the more, and he smiled at him confidently as he replied to Cotrell:

"*Un million de gracias.* It is good to know that *El Patron* likes my poor horse. But say that Azulito and I are as one—*amigos de curazon*. I cannot sell."

"Won't sell! Damn it, Cotrell, that's preposterous!"

The stormy look that had commanded all things for Jannison since a child was on his face. He swung and stared at Ygenio angrily. The Mexican's countenance was impassive now and told him nothing.

"I don't like bein' held up," Jannison muttered. Then: "Cotrell, tell him I'll make a limit of two hundred—not a damned cent more."

"*Sabe, Ygenio?*" said Cotrell gently. "Señor Jannison offers two hundred pesos for the horse."

Ygenio listened. His face remained masklike, but his eyes slowly took on a different light. Horses and cattle he could comprehend in terms of his own needs. The price of twenty-five horses for one! *Por Dios*, there was no limit to such wealth! With it he could build an adobe *casa* with two rooms—

Then the golden thread of his dream was broken. There was a plaintive little nicker behind him; he felt a warm breath and the nuzzling of a soft nose at his shoulder. *Ay de mí!* sighed Ygenio in his heart. It was cruel to love two things so greatly and so differently. Azulito gave so much and asked so little; his Serafina demanded so much without giving. But she was of the beauty of the *santas* and not to be denied—not even the sacrifice of Azulito!

Suddenly he shook off the touch of the little horse and turned to Cotrell, blank-eyed. "*Bueno, señor,*" he said. "*Esta bueno.* For two hundred pesos I sell Azulito."

MANY THINGS had to be done before Ygenio was ready to present himself to Don Sais. There was the formal request to be Serafina's *esposo*—written in beautiful words by the wife of the *mayordomo*—to be sent; there was the blue slip of paper given by *El Patron* to be changed into real

money; and there were many things to be bought. Then, gay in fiesta clothes, he rode down the hill and past the little whitewashed church into Pueblo Roma.

No one greeted him. All was silent. Even Don Sais' *tienda*, where old Eusabio, the town drunkard, slept in the shade, was closed.

"*Levante-se!* Wake and greet me, amigo!" Ygenio laughed, reining in at Eusabio's feet. "Wake, *borracho!* It is bad luck to ride the length of a town without a traveler's welcome." He tossed a shiny dollar down on the heaving mound of the sleeper's stomach.

There was a vast groan from under the disreputable hat. Eusabio came to life, and even before his bleary eyes saw the donor he was clawing for the gift.

"*Que buena suerte, Don Ygenio!*" he wheezed as he rang the coin on his teeth. "May the *santas* always keep you. This is the fourth gift they have sent your unworthy servant in two days."

"To be so generous the whole world must share my gladness," said Ygenio.

"Ay, gladness in the heart makes the hand generous. May the rich ever be happy! There is the Señorita Serafina who is happy and one peso she gave me."

"Señorita Serafina's goodness is understood."

"Then her papa also gave. May San Iago give him long life to behold many grandchildren!"

"*Seguramente!*" agreed Ygenio fervently. "Who else gave?"

"An Americano—*muy rico*. He gave money and a fiesta for all the pueblo. He was the most generous because"—Eusabio leered up at Ygenio and winked—"because he expected much joy as a reward. He marries Señorita Serafina this very day."

Ygenio sat very rigid in the saddle, feeling his heart explode within him.

"Say that again," he choked at last.

"Say it very slowly so that I may not misunderstand. Speak, before I ride your foulness into the earth!"

Eusabio hastily gathered himself into the shelter of the deep doorway. "*Santa Maria! Dispense-me, Don Ygenio! I had forgotten that you were one of her amantes.*"

"Speak, *viejo!* Speak on!"

"It is true, as Heaven is my witness! She is this day married to the *hacendado* from over the river. The church here was too poor for her, and she and Don Tomas and many friends went on the *tren* to the great *catedral* of Reynosa."

It was true, of course, mused Ygenio, staring down at Eusabio's sly, hateful face.

He remained very still, but inside he was quivering with pain, as though many knives were thrust deep in him without killing him.

Then he made himself speak. "Fool, I was but making sport of you," he said with lofty scorn. "I have known of this marriage for many days, but I am a rich man now and have been too busy to attend. Behold"—reaching into his sash, he tossed a handful of coins grandly at the gaping Eusabio—"that is to drink to Dona Serafina's happiness for me."

AFTER that Ygenio returned to his camp and was idle for days. His heart was empty of all feeling save one of intolerable loneliness. Even the desire for revenge had left him. This made him wonder; it was not the way of his race to be tame under such an affront. He should be seeking the treacherous Serafina and her gringo lover; instead he sat here doing nothing.

But one morning before dawn he was awakened by the tinkle of the horse bell close by. Azulito had always been the horse to carry it, and its sound in the crisp, thin air startled Ygenio. He threw back the sheepskin *manta* of his bed and listened to its familiar sound

for a time; then, suddenly, he laughed.

"*Por Dios*, I am a great fool!" he announced to the silent world. "Behold me! I sit here like a sick coyote, not knowing why I am sick. As though I did not know that there are many girls like Serafina to be bought for money, but only one brave *caballo* like that Azulito."

He arose then, and singing a ribald little song that mocked the virtue and faithfulness of women, prepared to go to work.

Always before he had used a certain cunning in catching the wild cattle; but he had no trained reata horse now. Sheer recklessness had to take the place of craft. He rode with a savage, insane abandon, roping his quarry when and where he found it. He lived like an *Indio*. No more Americano cigarettes with his coffee—there was no coffee, and no white sugar.

He had a buckskin thong. A knot tied in it tallied a steer caught and delivered to the ranch. Out of the haze of autumn, through the bleak winter, into the flat heat of summer he worked, cruel to his mounts, never sparing himself. But one day the thong was knotted tight from end to end. He packed his camp gear and the next day presented himself to Cotrell.

"If Señor Cotrell is agreeable I will have a reckoning of what is due me," he announced quietly.

Cotrell nodded, without surprise. After a moment with his tally book, he said: "You have worked hard, Ygenio. There is two hundred and forty-six pesos due you. That is a great deal."

"And this added to that—how much?" He thrust a dirty roll of bills at Cotrell. It was the remainder of Azulito's sale price.

"*Por Dios*, you are *rico*, Ygenio. *Muy rico*. Four hundred and twelve pesos—that is more than twice what you sold your pony for."

Ygenio gravely pondered the sum for a moment. "It is enough," he said to himself. "Even *El Patron* will accept twice what he gave." He turned to Cotrell then. "I will take it all, señor. I make a journey. After that I will return."

"But that is foolish, Ygenio. It is too much money to throw away for women and drink."

A mask dropped over Ygenio's eyes. "It is necessary that I take it all, señor," he said impassively. "It is mine, and I wish it."

When Ygenio jogged away from the ranch that afternoon he had the name of a city fixed in his mind. He knew that it lay far to the north and that *El Patron* lived there. As long as he was on the Nueces range he kept his destination to himself, but beyond its boundaries was a country he had never seen, and he began to make inquiries.

How far was *el Ciudad de San Antonio*? "Ah, *que mala suerte, amigo! Allí—muy, muy lejos.*" A graceful, undulating gesture of a brown hand toward the north indicated illimitable hills and valleys to be crossed. But Ygenio smiled and rode on.

Suddenly the country changed before him. Friendly hills all at once fell away into a vast flatness. Here there was nothing but distance running on to a dim horizon that retreated as he moved. Here were no ranchos where people greeted him at the end of the day's ride. Only fenced fields growing strange things.

Smooth, burning-white roads where men traveled in automobiles swifter than any quarter horse. Pueblos greater than he had ever dreamed of. Faces that looked at him suspiciously as though he were a ladrone.

After many days of this his horse went lame. He sold it to a farmer for a few dollars and trudged on. Once in a long while a countryman offered

him a ride, but mostly he walked. *Ay de mí—muy, muy lejos!*

But there was such a city as San Anton'!

Ygenio found many of his people there, but they were more like Americanos than his own *gente*. They wore the same dark, ugly clothes and stiff hats. They were unfriendly and jeered at him. He must be an *Indio*, they said, he was so very *estupid*. How were they to know if there was an Americano called Jannison who had a *grullo* horse whose name was Azulito? Let him speak to the *policia* about it—that was their business, answering foolish questions.

But the burly, hard-faced men in their grand uniforms frightened Ygenio. They watched him everywhere as though he were a *vagabundo* and motioned him on before he could find courage to speak.

IT WAS quite by chance, then, that he came to the end of his quest. Wandering through the maze of streets one day, searching as always, he found himself on the outskirts of the city. The clamor that deafened him was behind, the air was cleaner; he could breathe and think once more. He kept walking, and after a time saw a veritable *palacio* set on a hill.

Below it was a great press of people surrounding a green field with white posts planted at either end. And at the far side of this field were a number of men—some in white shirts, some in blue, who rode beautiful horses and struck with long sticks at a white ball.

Shuffling behind the line, Ygenio wondered at the strangeness of these Americanos who were so cold, yet became like children because eight men fought as if drunk over a foolish little *pelota*. Suddenly the murmur of voices about him ran into a great shout. The bunched riders had broken apart and were thundering up the field in pursuit of the ball.

A white-shirted man raced ahead and reversed it with a slashing backhand stroke. Horses slid on their haunches, spun, and collided; and for a time Ygenio saw nothing but a medley of blue-and-white shirts and a tangle of plunging horses.

Then the ball leaped out over the bright grass. At once a horse carrying a blue rider whirled from the mêlée. Before whites or blues could disentangle to attack or defend, the horse caught up with the ball. Perfectly placed behind it, the rider coolly dribbled it through the line of interference into neutral territory; then, with long smashing strokes, sent it bounding up the field.

For a moment swaying bodies and waving arms hid the play from Ygenio, then an opening came and he saw the player clearly. It was *El Patron* he looked at, and—praise to the *Virgen Purisima*!—the horse he rode was Azulito.

Ygenio never heard the last sharp impact of mallet on ball as Jannison triumphantly stroked the ball through for the winning goal. And not until the timekeeper's whistle ended the chukker and game that decided the All-American Polo Championship did he remember to thank God for His goodness in bringing him to *El Patron*.

Jannison reached the pony paddock ahead of an onrush of admirers, and Rorke, his head groom, himself took his reins.

"Congratulations, sorr! A great game, sorr," said Rorke, tenderly fitting a blanket over Azulito's steaming barrel. "I never saw a better played—even at Hurlin'am, sorr. And you know horseflesh, if I might say so. Nobody ever rode a braver, brainier animal than this roan, sorr."

"It is somethin' to pick a cold-blooded brute out of the scrub and win on him against the pick of Eastern thoroughbreds." Jannison laughed proudly.

He turned to rub the lathered head at his shoulder, but the little blue pulled away from his caress. He had found something amid the reek of all these humans that excited him, a smell he had thought lost forever. He stared into the crowd fixedly for a moment and caught it again; then, nickering softly, pushed at Jannison to reach it.

Jannison, snatching at the reins, saw a dusty, bedraggled figure tear through the edge of his admirers and bring up before him with a rush.

"Your humble *serviente*," began Ygenio, dragging at his sombrero. "You remember me, perhaps, *Señor Patron*—your poor vaquero, Ygenio?"

Jannison eyed him with astonishment and distaste. "I say, Rorke, what the devil is this?" he appealed at last. "What is he tryin' to say?"

"Do you not remember, señor? Ygenio José Ramon Maria Segoya from your estancia. He who sold the *grullo caballo*?"

Ygenio halted, finding it very hard to go on before so many amused faces; then, all at once, his thoughts ran into a torrent of soft mountain Spanish.

"He's tryin' to say that he's the man you bought the roan from," broke in Rorke in a breathless lapse. "He says that God brought him here to get it back, sorr. Says he can't sleep nor eat without it—it bein' like a mother and sweetheart to him. Sounds crazy to me, he does."

Ygenio waited patiently and the legal owner of the little blue horse found something profoundly disturbing in his dark eyes. Besides, Jannison realized, the scene was becoming a little ridiculous for him.

"I remember the beggar now," he said with a short laugh. "He's far from bein' crazy. Tried to hold me up when I bought the animal. Tell him that, Rorke. Tell him to get off the place or I'll have him put off."

Ygenio saw *El Patron* turn from him,

angry because he had not understood. He shook Rorke off and sprang after Jannison with one hand on his arm, the other pawing at his sash.

"Señor! But listen, señor!" he called in an urgency of passion. "It is to buy Azulito that I came. *Mira!* I have a great fortune to offer—double that which you gave——" But in that instant something struck him, and *El Patron* and Azulito and all the startled faces about him faded——

"Crazy, murderin' greaser!" snarled Rorke, rubbing the knuckles of his great fist. "Reachin' for a knife, he was. He'd have had it in you in another minute, sorr."

YGENIO came to his senses lying beyond the hedge by the road. The great field was deserted, but on the sanded slope where the stables were he could see strings of horses being groomed and exercised. It was a long way off, and dusk, but he was able to pick out a blue-coated pony being walked about. He watched impassively until Azulito was led into the door of the near wing, then he spoke to himself.

"Twice have I been a great fool," he murmured. "I have much money, and yet I am sad because I have lost a woman and a horse. *Hola!* I will take myself to the city and fill this emptiness in my heart with drink and music."

It was a brave resolve, but Ygenio continued to sit there in the gathering night; and presently he was not there at all. He was in the hills above the Nueces again, camped beside a tumbling little stream. The lazy tinkle of Azulito's bell came to him as he lay warm and contented under the drift of camp-fire smoke.

But suddenly he heard the bell leap into a clang of alarm. *Que tonto, Azulito!* There is nothing to fear. A prowling *gato del monte*, perhaps. Nothing that a brave horse should make so great a noise over.

But there was a bell dinning in the night. Ygenio moved, fully awake, all his senses alive with a great fear. At once he saw a faint plume of smoke curling above the comb of the stable roof. Then, somehow, he was on the other side of the hedge, running, shouting with a voice that was cracked and thin with terror.

No one ever knew how it happened. When the smoke roused one of the grooms quartered in the upper story the fire seemed to be in a tack room next the north wing. By the time Jannison had joined Rorke and the stablemen, however, the smoke had shifted. Wisps of light, grayish fog were drifting through the high ventilating windows in the main stem of the elongated E. Then, without warning, a cloud, thick, black, and choking, poured from the door of the center section where most of the horses of the visiting players were stabled. It was there that Jannison marshaled his men.

All during the rescue at that end, the real activity of the fire remained hidden. Behind the smoke screen it threw out, it ate through the partition of the tack room adjoining the north wing and found an easy trail into the feed alley that supplied the stalls there.

It crept down this swiftly, gained strength, and enveloped the entire end of the wing before its sudden glare broke through the windows of the upper story and informed Jannison of his mistake. Frantically, then, he turned to save his own precious animals.

The darkness inside the wing was lighted by flashes of fire reflected through the ventilators above the stalls, and the horses nearest the entrance were dragged out with little danger. But as Jannison fought deeper into the stifling smoke between the double row of doors he began to realize that the light was no longer a mere reflection.

It was very real and present, coming through innumerable unsuspected crev-

ices about him. A board in the ceiling warped and crackled; a flame slowly gathered there; then a burning piece dropped. Some one behind him trampled on it before it flared in the dry bedding; but he had seen it and knew what it meant.

All at once his mind, curiously detached from the working of his smoke-drugged body, told him he was insane to risk himself thus, to chance disfigurement or death for something that could be bought with money. Jannison, however, had courage. He summoned it and forced himself on to the next stall. Somehow he managed to get the door open; but that effort drained his will. He turned and, abandoning the horse, staggered back to the front.

Ygenio never knew how he reached the stables. By that time the exercise ground below the building was filled with horses. Unnoticed in the confusion, he darted among the dark plunging shapes, but he found no blue pony there to quiet his fears.

He turned up to the stables then and saw another group clustered before the end wing. Jannison, staring at the door, impotent and defeated, he could see distinctly; also he could count the tossing heads of the thoroughbreds held in the rear. Ygenio halted in shocked unbelief and cursed. Fools and cowards! They had left his Azulito inside, yet they did nothing!

He slipped closer into the circle of light, and then Jannison turned and recognized him. Ygenio caught the horrid suspicion that leaped into *El Patron's* eyes, sensed something terrible in the words he flung at him. A barrier of faces, hostile and without understanding, confronted him. For a bare instant he hesitated fearfully; then, before any one could intercept him, he whirled and ran back to the unguarded door in the center section.

No one followed him there. He was alone in a dreadful silence. A hot

gray fog shot through with faint streaks of red filled the corridor. But he had fought the swift, devouring brush fires that swept his hills, and as he started down the rows of empty stalls he unwound his sash and muffled his face against the burning poison in the air.

BRIGHT shoots of flame leaped and receded in the gloom ahead of him. Overhead there was an ominous crackling as of dry branches stirred by an angry wind. He reached the end of the corridor and found a door, hot to the touch. It gave in at his push and disclosed the tack room ablaze with creeping fire.

The end wall had fallen, and a tumbled mass of burning hay bales in the feed alley behind threw out myriads of tiny sputtering rockets. On the opposite side of the room there was another door; and from somewhere behind it came muted sounds of terror, a surge of imprisoned bodies. Ygenio lowered his head and flung himself across the inferno to that door.

After the terrible glare behind he was confronted with what seemed utter darkness. In reality he was surrounded by light; yet it revealed nothing beyond the reach of his hand. The greasy, opaquish smoke about him diffused the hot brilliance of the flames so that whole wing seemed filled with a mist of molten copper.

As he paused in it, bewildered, Ygenio became aware of himself. He realized an intolerable weariness; he felt the pain that pressed hard on every inch of his body, the sting of the poison he breathed into his lungs. But all these things were suddenly crowded out of his consciousness by the sounds of distress that now reached him so distinctly.

He started, pawing the air as if brushing cobwebs from his eyes. After his first step he moved as if dragging

his feet through heavy mire. Wherever he groped he found empty stalls—then more empty stalls. He staggered from one to another; fell, got to his feet again.

In the midst of the appalling heat he felt cold; an icy hand like the hand of Death gripped his stomach. His head grew dull and insensible as his arms, and only the passionate elemental will in him kept his legs working. He was splendid, heroic in the singleness of his thought.

"*Santa Maria!*" he prayed. "*Virgen Purisima*, do not forsake Thy sinful servant. Out of Thy love and pity help him to find what he seeks!"

Then a harsh snort blasted through the haze; a gigantic shape loomed over him. The horse Jannison had turned loose in his last effort whirled from where it huddled close to its penned stablemate and lashed at him in a frenzy of terror.

Without seeing it clearly, Ygenio knew it was not Azulito, and he fought past it to the closed stall. He fumbled and found the catch, but before he could pull the door back, the horse inside lunged to join the other and tossed him back like a bit of charred wood.

He lay where he fell for what seemed to him a long time. Looking upward, his eyes became fascinated with a band of flame that wavered through the smoke like a monstrous glowworm. It lengthened and spread over him, and then a portion of it dropped down the side of a stall close to him. He watched this glow and crawl and shoot bright tongues of flame over the floor at him, with a kind of shocked wonder that he should have no desire to escape them.

Then his attention wandered to something else. Very dimly he heard a hoof strike a partition hidden beyond the glare about him. A voice, thin and

quavery and far off, struggled with a cry of supplication.

It was miles to where that sound came from. It became fainter as he traveled. At last it was drowned out altogether by a great roaring in his ears, like the blast of a storm in the High Sierras. He forced himself on, but—*Madre de Dios*, how very tired he was! He was tired of this perpetual seeking that never found; this everlasting quest through a nightmare filled with phantoms.

He hurtled into a stall door. His fingers hooked in the open grille at the top, and his body dropped its entire weight on them. But he knew they would soon let him fall; he would fall and never rise again, and he was glad. His head sank wearily down on his slipping hands; and then a breath, far cooler than the air he drew into his lungs, played over his face. The voice he had heard so long ago was in his ear again, a choked, rumbling little nicker of recognition.

MANY things happened after that, and Ygenio remembered them only vaguely. He opened the door of the stall; that he knew. Azulito came to him, and he clutched at his mane and blanket and hung there limply like one of the marionettes at the fiestas with its strings cut. Then it seemed to him as though for many hours he and Azulito chased two demon horses in whirling circles of light. They were *caballos del Diablo*, Ygenio was certain; but Azulito fought them with teeth and hoofs, and all at once drove them before him from the torment of *purgatorio* into the cool sweetness of *El Dio's* air.

Just as they arrived there a great pillar of flame and smoke burst out behind. It shot into the sky with noises like the whirl of gigantic wings, and for an instant seemed to fill the world with flying fire. Then all things vanished before Ygenio, and opening his eyes again, he found himself in a room far

grander than any he had ever imagined.

He had no time to consider it, however, for there beside him was *El Patron*. His eyes were very bright, and he was holding one of his hands and talking to him concerning Azulito; and while he could not understand all he said, deep inside him Ygenio knew that he was pleased with him.

SOME three weeks later John Cotrell paused before his office door to watch a horseman jog down the lane from the north. Immediately he stopped, the rider gave vent to a wild yell, and urged his horse into a furious run. He charged on as though bent on riding Cotrell down; then, a scant horse length away, a touch of his romal swerved his mount. It spun dizzily on hind feet, whirled, and plunged back to a precisely calculated stop.

The proper vaquero flourish made, the horse settled sedately in its tracks, the rider dropped his reins with a casual air, dismounted, and doffed his dusty headgear in a manner at once debonair and deferential.

"*Buenas días, señor!*" Ygenio beamed. "Observe, señor, that I have returned as I promised."

Considering that much of Ygenio's luxurious thatch of hair was shorn away, that he had only a faint marking of eyebrows, and no eyelashes whatever, Cotrell viewed him with less surprise than might have been expected.

"I observe," he replied dryly. "After so many days you have returned, wearing Señor Jannison's clothes and riding his horse."

Ygenio ran an abashed glance over the baggy riding breeches that clothed his lean nether parts and felt that some explanation was due. "There was an accident, señor," he murmured apologetically; "it was necessary that I use these *pantalones* to cover my nakedness. I shall return them, but Azulito is mine to keep. He was given to me by *El*

Patron, in the presence of many of his amigos and with many pleasant words."

"And why was that?" persisted Cotrell. "What caused him to give his vaquero a horse he paid so much for?"

"*Quién sabe?*" Ygenio shrugged. "Americanos—always excepting yourself, señor—are a strange people." He spat and studied the ground a moment. "It may have been that I showed *El Patron* how greatly I loved Azulito. It may have been that he thought Azulito more valuable to hunt wild cattle for him than to play foolish games. I do not know."

Having in his pocket Jannison's own account of the rescue of his horses, Cotrell stared a trifle suspiciously at Ygenio. But his candid, serene expression told Cotrell that he had answered him out of the rare simplicity of his heart, sublimely unaware of the splendor of his courage. Indeed at that very moment he had dismissed the past for a tangible interest in the present.

What engrossed Ygenio was a girl who had suddenly come from the patio of the ranch building. She walked lightly on slender bare feet as true mountain girls do. Her round, firm-breasted little figure was held proudly under the heavy pack of clothes she balanced on her sleek head. Moving by, she murmured a greeting to the superintendent, at the same time managing a swift glance of her soft eyes at Ygenio. He watched her through a period of entranced silence before he spoke.

"That *nina*, señor—she belongs on the estancia?"

"She is the niece of Pablo Gomez, the *jardinero*. She keeps his house since his wife died."

Ygenio turned and gathered up his reins. "If señor permits," he said gravely, "I will pay my respects to Don Pablo and tell him of my good fortune. After that Azulito and I will return to our work."

The Shadow of Atlantis

*A tale
of the
age of
shadows*

by Hal
Field
Leslie

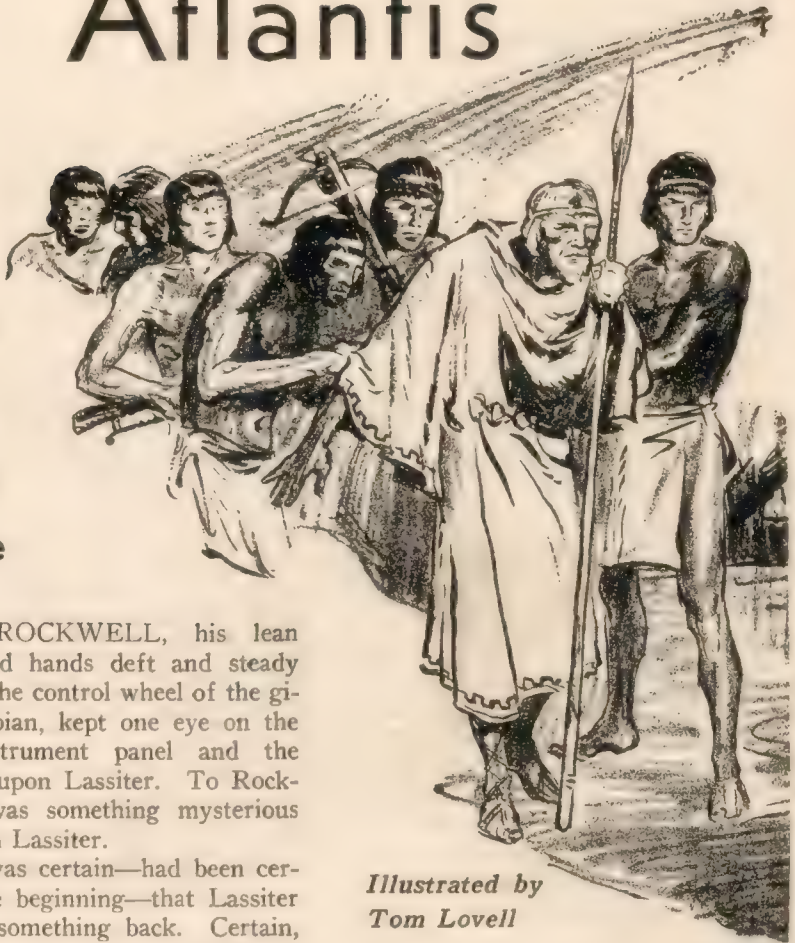
BRAD ROCKWELL, his lean bronzed hands deft and steady upon the control wheel of the gigantic amphibian, kept one eye on the elaborate instrument panel and the other warily upon Lassiter. To Rockwell, there was something mysterious about the man Lassiter.

Rockwell was certain—had been certain from the beginning—that Lassiter was holding something back. Certain, that in the dark caverns behind Lassiter's inscrutable gray-green eyes dwelt some intent not yet spoken, and not yet fathomed by any member of the expedition.

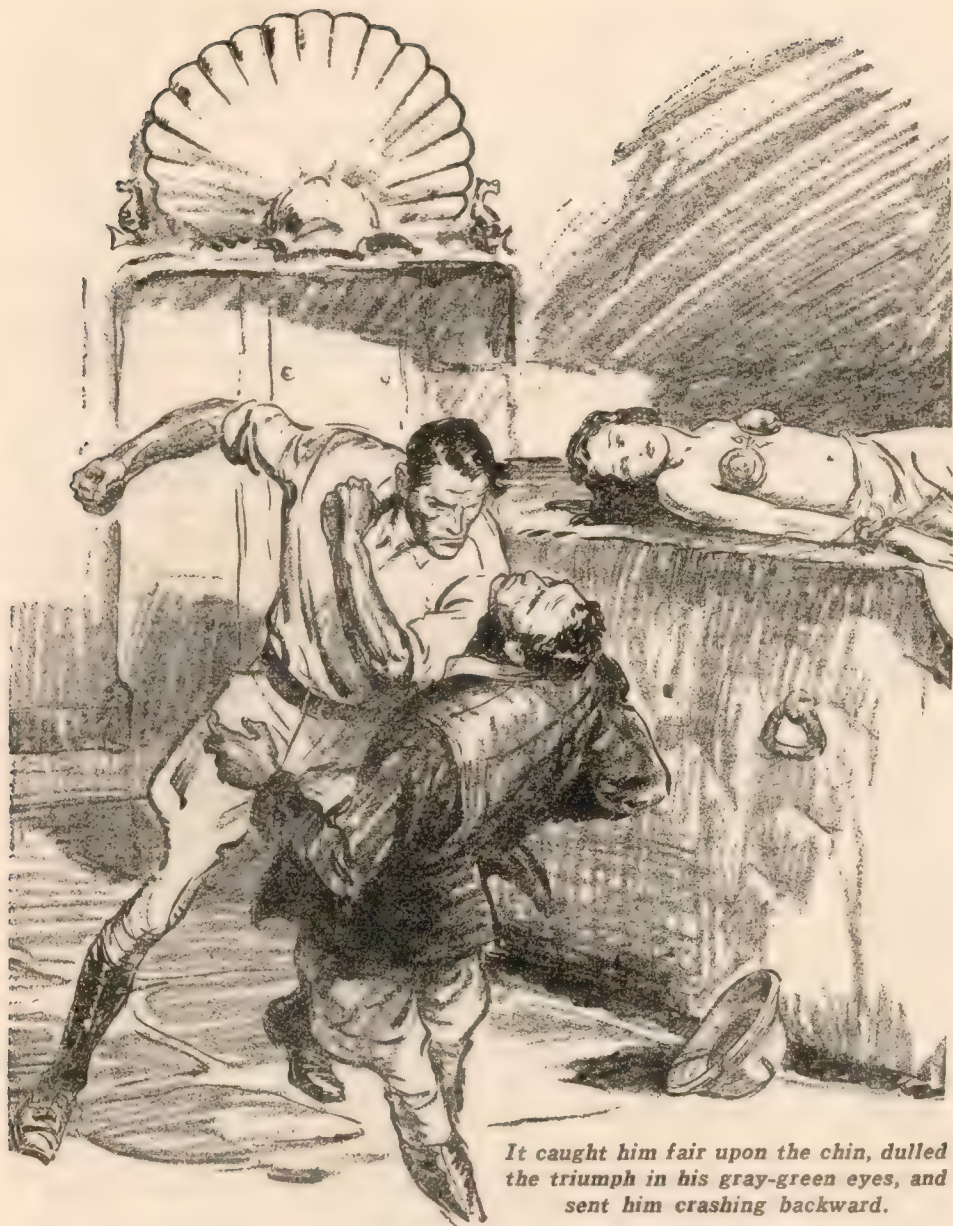
Rockwell was holding the ship at three thousand feet altitude; tooling her, by Lassiter's order, in wide majestic circles above the trackless jungles. Drone of motors, a Wagnerian symphony of tremendous power, drummed

ceaselessly against shining metal walls.

Lassiter, lost to all else but his purpose for the moment, was down in the nose of the ship, in the camera department. Crouched above the open circular spotting hatch, with a Zeiss glass at his eyes, he was intently studying the terrain down under—a land of sluggish streams winding lazily through tangled



*Illustrated by
Tom Lovell*



It caught him fair upon the chin, dulled the triumph in his gray-green eyes, and sent him crashing backward.

bush, and dark swamps slowly steaming under noonday sun.

Every line of Lassiter's compact body, the eager pitch of his shoulders, tight cords of his thick bronzed neck, a rigid bend of his muscular fingers about the black tubes of the glass—all

bespoke a concentration most intense.

A little too much concentration, reflected Brad Rockwell thoughtfully, in a man whose ostensible purpose is nothing more than the locating of a certain stand of rubber trees.

Of a sudden Lassiter's tense immo-

bility gave way to swift animation.

He put the glass aside, leaned toward the button-sized microphone on the wall close at hand. His words, deeply resonant and precise, came with penetrating clarity from the compact transmitter on the instrument panel:

"Narrow your swing, Rockwell. Make your present position its pivotal point. I'm going to take pictures."

With mechanical promptness Rockwell banked the ship, ruddered left, leveled away. Lassiter, with a curious eagerness, began to swing the long-range mapping camera into place.

Rockwell, watching Lassiter's every move through the glassed port below the instrument panel, was struck by the close resemblance of those moves to the castings of a bloodhound quickened upon some compelling scent.

And as he watched, there came swiftly upon Brad Rockwell one of those tingling, premonitory flashes that subtly warn a man he is witnessing inexplicable but portentous events in the making.

THE ADVENTURE had begun, prosaically enough, with a telephone call, a call that by merest chance caught Brad Rockwell at the hotel, at the last moment of one of his brief and infrequent stays in New York City.

Brad was a wanderer of the skyways. To him the sweetest sound in the world was the full-throated drone of a finely tuned motor eating blue distance toward far horizons.

But Brad was no penniless pilot, vagabonding on a shoestring; he was a graduate of Princeton, with sufficient income of his own to allow him untrammelled freedom in his chosen vocation.

Flying was Brad's life, and he loved it. And he lived it round and full.

Not yet twenty-seven, his name had many times been blazoned in headlines.

Twice he had soloed around the world in record time.

Following his own whims of exploration, his tail skid had kicked the dust and mud and snow of a thousand isolated landing places. Flights where only sheer grit, and perfect coordination of eye and brain and hand stood between him and grim disaster.

Something of these qualities was revealed in Brad Rockwell's bearing as he swung lightly down the softly carpeted lobby stairway toward the hotel's main entrance.

Clad now in a neat business suit of conservative brown, he carried his six feet of sun-bronzed solidity with the lithe, free swing of a finely conditioned athlete. His jaw was ruggedly square and determined. And his eyes, laced with countless tiny sun wrinkles at the outer corners, were keenly blue and direct.

Brad had just checked out at the hotel desk. He was bound for the waiting taxi that was to convey him directly to Newark Airport, where his speedy low-wing ship was fueled and tuned for a swift night hop to San Francisco. His ultimate destination was India; his intent was to do battle with the treacherous winds guarding the crest of Mount Everest and to explore the bleak fastnesses of the Tibetan plateau.

However, at the very outset, there occurred an interruption to his plans.

As he stepped out upon the sidewalk, headed for the taxi, a bell hop came barging through the revolving door at his heels.

"Mr. Rockwell! You're wanted on the phone, sir."

Brad was a little surprised. He had expected no call, had not the faintest idea as to who could be wanting him. He swung about, reentered the hotel, and was connected with the call.

"Rockwell?" The man's voice coming in along the wire was nervously incisive. "Brad Rockwell?"

"Yes," said Brad. "Speaking."

The receiver emitted an explosive sigh of relief in his ear. "Glad they caught you, Rockwell. Mighty glad! I should have been keenly disappointed if they hadn't."

Brad smiled. It had been two years since he had heard that voice, but he recognized it at once. It belonged to Ross Honeyman, head of the great Honeyman Rubber Industries.

"And I should have shared your disappointment, Mr. Honeyman," responded Brad quietly. "Is there something I can do?"

"Yes, yes," asserted Honeyman promptly. "You can come out to dinner this evening. Very informal. I'm at my place in Oyster Bay. I'll have a car at the station to meet you."

Brad hesitated. He disliked social commitments. He had an idea that Honeyman, learning of his brief presence in town, was taking this way of showing continued gratitude for a past service rendered.

A couple of years back, Ross Honeyman's seventeen-year-old son, craving a bit of adventure in the raw, had skipped school and joined up with the crew of a Newfoundland sealer.

Far out on the sealing grounds, with a nor'easter raging and the ship hopelessly jammed in the middle of a compact ice field, young Honeyman had fallen desperately ill. His identity came out then, and the ship's wireless crackled a call for help.

It was Brad Rockwell who responded, hurled his own plane into the teeth of the storm, picked up the boy and brought him down to a Halifax hospital in time for the operation that saved his life.

"Don't say you can't come!" urged Honeyman. "You're the one man living I want most to see right now. I—but, dammit, I can't tell you over the phone. I *must* see you! If what I have in mind

goes through, it'll startle the world. Rockwell, I need you."

Perhaps it was those last four words, more than any of the others so vibrant with tense emotion, that influenced Brad's characteristically swift decision.

"All right, Mr. Honeyman," he said. "I'll come."

II.

THERE WAS an air of repressed excitement about Ross Honeyman. Brad noticed it the moment he was ushered into the presence of the rubber magnate, in the richly paneled library of his big house overlooking the dusky waters of the Sound.

Honeyman was not alone; with him was another man—a man who straightway caught, and for the moment held, Brad's attention.

The room was softly lighted, the stranger's features not too clearly revealed. Yet Brad had an instant and definite impression of dominating, driving force beneath a darkly smooth exterior.

Honeyman himself, seated on a deep leather settee beside the other, seemed curiously dwarfed and colorless by comparison.

He jumped to his feet, trotted across the room with hand outstretched and countenance alight with genuine pleasure.

"Glad to see you again, Rockwell, my boy!" he exclaimed. "Good indeed! I haven't forgotten. Never will forget!"

"I don't think I shall ever quite forget that trip, either, Mr. Honeyman," said Brad. "Can I be of service again?"

"Indeed yes! That's what I wanted to see you about. I shouldn't be satisfied with any other man for the job. But we'll talk it over later. Meantime there's some one I want you to meet."

He led Brad toward the settee.

"Lassiter, this is the chap I've told you about, been so anxious to get hold

of. Mr. Rockwell—Mr. Lassiter."

Lassiter rose unhurriedly, as if deliberation in every move was habitual with him. As their hands met, Brad's eyes took swift appraisal of the man.

He was clad with careless good taste in substantial tweeds. Less tall than Brad, by near half a foot, he must have weighed fully thirty pounds more. He was built as solidly as rock—broad-shouldered, deep-chested, extraordinarily well-muscled even to the tips of his firm, hard fingers. And he was indelibly marked with the deep rich bronze of the tropics.

His head, as smoothly contoured as if shaped in a blunt-nosed bullet mold, was covered with a vigorous thatch of crisp black hair, close-cropped. He had the ample forehead of a thinker, the chin and jaw of a doer, and the eyes of— Brad felt unable to say just what they indicated.

Unusual they were. Elusive gray-green in color. Inscrutable as deep sea water.

The sum total of Brad's snap judgment was that Lassiter was a man who could be utterly ruthless in attaining his own end, yet a man who could make himself well-liked by other men—and doubtless by women, too.

Lassiter was smiling—a slight parting of full, thick lips to reveal strong teeth that were ivory-white by contrast with his bronzed features. But Brad was aware that those queer gray-green eyes of the man were not smiling; they were appraising him from head to foot with a curious intentness.

"Your exploits, even before Honeyman told me about you, were not entirely unfamiliar to me," said Lassiter, and his voice was deep and pleasant. "You see, even in the jungles we sometimes chance upon such things as old newspapers."

"Jungles of the Amazon," put in Honeyman by way of explanation. "Lassiter's favorite stamping ground.

He's a scientist with the urge of an adventurer, Rockwell, probing secrets from out-of-the-way places."

"Interesting," commented Brad. "I've seen portions of that big-river country, myself—always flying high and fast, of course."

"Did you ever feel that you'd like a closer look at it?" asked Lassiter curiously. "A bit of firsthand contact with its lures and, shall we say, mysteries?"

"He'd dissect you, right now, if I'd let him," put in Honeyman laughingly. "But I'm not going to. Come, Lassiter, we've got a thing or two to show Rockwell. There'll be time before dinner is served. Let's do it."

Lassiter nodded. Honeyman ordered a car brought to the door. And a few minutes later the three men were alighting at a water-front corner of the rubber magnate's big estate.

AS BRAD followed his two companions along the bright path of the car's headlamps toward a wide, squat building of concrete and steel and glass looming bulkily in the early November dark, his ears caught the muffled hum of a powerful outboard motor drawing inshore across starlit waters.

Without troubling to excuse himself, Lassiter swung quickly away toward the end of the building on the Sound. Honeyman paused, jiggling a bunch of keys in one hand with a touch of nervous impatience.

The approaching hum of the outboard dropped to lower tempo, ceased altogether. There came a faint thump, as of a small boat's touching an unseen landing float. Lassiter's deep voice drifted back, the words indistinguishable above the wash of the fast boat's wake.

Shortly Lassiter returned. With him was a girl. The bright headlamps of the idling car revealed her clearly to Brad.

A year or two younger than himself, Brad judged her. Slenderly boyish in build. Clad in white slacks and a sweater of heavy maroon wool. A beret of like color was jammed at a jaunty angle atop jet-black wind-blown hair. Salt spray glistening on faintly flushed cheeks. Dark eyes alight with the sheer joy of living.

"My daughter, Rockwell," said Honeyman quickly. "Claire, I want you to meet the man who saved your brother's life."

"I've wanted to, for ever so long!" exclaimed the girl with impulsive frankness as she gave a firm and sea-damp hand to Brad. "I'm only sorry, Mr. Rockwell, that I wasn't home at the time. Also, I'm not sure I wouldn't have insisted on going along with you on that flight."

"She's an adventurous little kid, Rockwell," put in Honeyman with a fond paternal chuckle. "Fast horses, fast cars, fast boats—and now she wants a plane of her own to play with. She'll be the death of me yet!"

"Father!" There was laughter close behind the mock severity of Claire's tone. "Just for that I *shall* get a plane and learn to fly it—see if I don't!" And she added mischievously: "Perhaps Mr. Rockwell would teach me how."

Brad caught the swift passing of a frown across Lassiter's bronzed countenance, half shadowed beyond the girl's shoulder. It was evident that her final suggestion had not pleased the man. Brad wondered why; wondered if that quick frown marked the stirrings of a swift and unreasonable jealousy.

"I'm sure it would be a pleasure to teach you how to handle a ship," he told her with a smile. "Perhaps some day we——"

"I think we'd better get at the business in hand," cut in Lassiter, a trifle brusquely. "If Miss Honeyman will excuse us."

"Yes, yes," said the rubber magnate.

"Claire, you run along and dress for dinner. Ride up in the car and send it back for us."

"Righto," she responded cheerily; and then, with a flash of friendly smile at Brad, she was gone.

Honeyman moved to a small side-door near the center of the building, unlocked it, stepped inside. A switch clicked. Bright light flooded the interior.

Brad, following Lassiter across the threshold, saw that the inshore end of the structure housed a completely equipped machine shop, with half a dozen sturdy chain hoists depending from steel girders, and benches with orderly arrays of tools along three walls.

This much Brad saw at one swift glance; then his gaze swung the other way, and he stopped short in his tracks. A low whistle of keen appreciation left his lips.

For there, gleaming with the brilliant splendor of polished duralumin, its enormous wing spread almost completely filling the seaward end of the wide building, stood the most beautiful and capable-looking amphibian that Brad had ever seen.

Brad's thoughts ran swiftly back to Ross Honeyman's words over the phone: "If what I have in mind goes through, it'll startle the world!" Obviously this big new ship figured somewhere in the plans which lay behind the rubber magnate's declaration.

Brad wondered where the gigantic amphibian did figure, and how.

III.

"THREE thousand horsepower, Rockwell!" Honeyman told him proudly. "Bellosky designed her for me, along ideas laid down by Lassiter. She was built mostly at the factory and assembled here. Let's look her over."

She was a twin-hull craft, mono-

winged, with a wide cabin fuselage superimposed upon and between the two separate hulls. She carried three mighty Whirlone motors—one on a nacelle under each wing, the third a pusher mounted on struts above the cabin. A sturdy skid wheel, and a retractable landing gear astride the wide space between the two gleaming hulls, carried her weight now.

Outwardly, from the big fish-eye landing lights upon her streamlined nose to the tip of her high tail assembly, she was a thing of beauty. Inwardly she at once captured Brad's admiration—and his curiosity.

The main body of the ship housed two decks. Entrance to the lower was by way of a door in the side wall, just above and near the stern of the starboard hull.

"We're using public-utility lighting at present," explained Honeyman as he stepped in and pressed a switch. "On flights the ship will manufacture her own electricity. There's a generator geared to the center motor, and a storage unit built into the tail space."

Brad, following Honeyman, found himself in a brightly lighted transverse companionway, with a closed door on either side, and stairs rising steeply to a landing on the upper deck.

Honeyman opened the rearward door, ushered Brad into a small galley where facilities for preparing meals were complete. Beyond the galley was a tiny wash room, and beyond the wash room, sleeping quarters for four.

Returning to the companionway, Honeyman nodded at the forward door. "Lassiter's own private sanctum," he said with a chuckle. "We'll look at it later."

Lassiter smiled, led the way to the upper landing. Here again were two closed doors, fore and aft. The latter gave into another tiny wash room. And this in turn gave back to luxurious sleeping quarters for two persons.

Forward of the stairway landing was the lounging cabin. Here deep and comfortable chairs of green leather, ranged alongside wide windows of shatter-proof glass, invited rest. Book racks and smoking stands promised relaxation from the monotony of long flights.

Forward of the cabin were two compartments, side by side. One was the chart and radio room; the other was furnished as sleeping quarters for two pilots.

Accessible either from the pilots' quarters or the chart room, was the glass-inclosed control cockpit, where dual wheels fronted comfortable leather seats.

Below the elaborate instrument panel, a glassed port gave full view of the camera compartment down in the rounded nose of the ship. It was connected with the cockpit by a narrow descending companionway.

Honeyman, his tongue running with pride of ownership, led the way down.

Here, mounted on swinging brackets above a circular spotting hatch, was installed the very latest development in long-range mapping cameras. On the wall, a tiny but highly sensitive microphone and speaker combination gave effortless two-way communication with the control cockpit.

"And now," said Honeyman, his hand on the knob of a closed door at the rear of the camera compartment, "we'll have a look at Lassiter's lair."

BRAD was more than a little astonished to find this last compartment a marvelously well-equipped-and-stocked chemical research laboratory.

The place was fully as large as the lounging cabin and chart room and pilots' room combined. Its gleaming metallic panels, its row on row of filled bottles and complicated apparatus reposing on racks behind shatter-proof

glass, conveyed an impression of almost surgical cleanliness and austerity.

One corner, however, was given over to a comfortable leather chair and an aluminum smoking stand. And another was occupied by a severely plain drop berth for sleeping.

Here, too—built into the wall at the head of the berth and just alongside the doorway leading out to the entrance companionway—was a glass-inclosed gun cabinet containing several belted and holstered automatic pistols and half a dozen rifles. One of these latter was a light trombone .22. The others were businesslike bolt-action weapons, of a caliber sufficiently large for any emergency.

The final feature revealed to Brad, after he and Honeyman and the silently watchful Lassiter had emerged from the ship, was a small outboard motor and a ten-foot folding boat of light plywood and canvas, snugly stowed away inside one of the gleaming hulls and accessible by removal of a bolted deck plate.

"There's a duplicate boat and motor in the other hull," said Honeyman, "and ample storage space in each for supplies and camping equipment. What do you think of her Rockwell?"

"She's a marvelous craft," Brad told him. "The last word, so I'd say, in anything of her kind."

Honeyman smiled. "How would you like to fly her, Rockwell?"

"A test flight, you mean?"

"No, no! Much more than that. I—— But I'll let Lassiter tell you, lay it down from the beginning. Go ahead, Lassiter."

Lassiter nodded. "I'll be brief, Rockwell. A year ago I was poking around the upper Amazon country, in a region wholly unknown to white men. And it so happened that I was able to befriend a wandering native—or rather, a chap who was a conglomerate mixture of Jivaro and Antipas and Cocama, with

a dash of ancient Portuguese blood thrown in for good measure. The fellow gave me a rather remarkable little caucho ball—crude rubber, you know—and along with it a story no less remarkable.

"This native had recently come down from the headwaters of one of those many and nameless tributaries of the big river. He told a rambling and disjointed tale of how he had run foul of some extraordinarily queer tribe up there in the dark country. Not particularly interesting in itself—the jungles are full of such fanciful rumors, you know—except for that caucho ball he'd brought back with him.

"He'd made it, so he declared, from the milk of a mighty seringa, the like of which he had never seen anywhere in the jungles. I got to playing with the thing, and I discovered it to be of a quality hitherto unknown. In fact, with the limited apparatus and reagents in my outfit, I went far enough to see tremendous possibilities in it.

"I was then on the point of returning to the States—had to return, for certain private reasons. But I was certain if that particular tree could be located, others must be found. And I was convinced that, with a well-equipped laboratory on the spot and an abundant supply of the fresh sap to work with, I could develop a product that would be far superior to any known rubber.

"Lacking funds, I brought the idea to Mr. Honeyman. He was quick to see its possibilities."

"Show him, Lassiter!" urged Honeyman. "Let him see for himself."

Deliberately Lassiter produced two small rubber bands, one from either watch pocket of his vest.

"They look exactly alike, don't they? But they're not. One is ordinary; this other I fashioned from a bit of that native's caucho ball. Watch."

Lassiter struck a match, held both

rubber bands in turn in contact with the flame. The first burned quite readily; the other, not at all.

"Can't you see it, Rockwell?" exclaimed Honeyman with repressed excitement. "See it applies particularly to the tire industry? A rubber wholly free from the ravages of friction heat! Think what control of that would mean to me!"

Brad nodded thoughtfully; and Honeyman went on:

"I tell you, Rockwell, this is the beginning of a development that will startle the world!"

Brad smiled. "And you want me to help it along by flying Lassiter down to the jungles in this ship. Am I right?"

"Yes, yes. But not Lassiter alone. There'll be a chef, of course. And a flying mechanic—chosen by yourself, if you happen to know of a good man for the job. Lassiter will pick up his native at—— Where is it, Lassiter? Manáos? Yes, yes. And I shall go myself, of course. And Claire insists on going. Also, I have arranged for a doctor to accompany us. There'll be eight in the expedition, all told."

Brad hesitated. He scarcely heard the rubber magnate's voice running on exuberantly about what he expected to come of that jungle expedition. Brad was unaccountably certain that Lassiter was holding something back. And mutely significant were those rifles in the laboratory gun cabinet.

An inexplicable premonition of danger ahead, of some unguessed menace lurking down there in the jungle stamping ground of the man with the gray-green eyes, lay heavily for the moment upon Brad Rockwell.

And swift before the eye of his mind rose that vividly wholesome figure of Claire Honeyman. His own plans went crashing.

"I'll fly your ship, Mr. Honeyman," he said.

IV.

BRAD ROCKWELL, jockeying the big ship in slow level circles above the steaming jungles, trying vainly to figure out what might lie behind Lassiter's curiously intent maneuverings with the mapping camera, was at the moment alone in the control cockpit.

But not for long did his solitude endure. An exceedingly short but chunky mechanic, with rumpled rusty hair and a humorous mouth and laughing gray eyes, came in through the chart room and perched himself on the vacant pilot's seat.

A wizard with tools and motors, this young "Shorty" Hultz whom Brad had plucked away from Newark Airport and given a place with the expedition. An expert mechanic, and no mean hand at flying a ship, either.

Shorty cocked an appreciative eye at the three perfectly synchronized tachometers on the instrument panel; then his glance dropped to the glassed port below, where Brad's attention lay.

"I hope his royal nibs has found what he's been lookin' for all morning." Shorty grinned. "I've just come up from the galley, Brad, and I'm tellin' you if we don't get a chance to light down pretty soon there'll be fricasseed native in the pot. It's gettin' on the chink's nerves, the way that chap picked up by Lassiter at Manáos is wailin' on his bunk. Ah Foy swears he'll carve and cook him, if he don't shut up. Acts like a scared rabbit, he does."

Brad smiled. "Likely you'd be scared, too, if you were whisked up and away by the first plane you ever saw in your life," he asserted gravely. "I imagine Huikima thinks the devil has got him."

"Which may not be far wrong, at that!" Shorty was suddenly grim. "Those queer eyes of Lassiter's—they give me the jitters, Brad. Me, I don't trust that man!"

"Neither do I," admitted Brad.

Shorty threw him a quick sharp look, a little surprised.

Brad leaned close. "Listen, Shorty, I've had a feeling, all along, that there's something sinister in the wind. I'm telling you because there may come a time when you and I will have to stand together. Meantime, keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. Sabe?"

Shorty whistled softly, nodded. His gray eyes, fixed with new attention upon Lassiter, were quick with awakened thoughts. But after a moment his ready grin broke to the surface.

"I'd begun to figure this expedition was going to be about as excitin' as a ferry trip across the Hudson," he declared. "But not now, I don't. You want me to spell you for a while?"

Brad shook his head.

"Then I reckon I'll catch me a little nap, Brad—just so I'll be able to keep my eyes open later on."

Whistling cheerfully the diminutive mechanic got down and made his way into the pilots' room. Unconcerned and unworried, Shorty was; yet Brad knew he could be depended on to the last ditch.

An undertone of tango music, creeping softly in below the muffled drone of the motors, caught Brad's ear. Glancing back, he glimpsed Claire Honeyman through the glassed upper panel of the chart-room door. She was toying with the dials of the short-wave set. Visible in the lounging cabin beyond, Ross Honeyman and the neatly Vandyked Dr. Branch were absorbed in one of their interminable games of cribbage.

Claire's dark head was bowed, her attention wholly engrossed by the dials of the set. Brad, swinging his glance back to Lassiter, frowned thoughtfully.

For the entire duration of the easy-stage flight down from the States—in fact, ever since that night of the dinner at which final details of the expedition had been worked out—Claire Honeyman

had maintained toward Brad an attitude of polite reticence, strangely in contrast with the warm friendliness she had displayed at their first moment of meeting. Brad wondered—

"That's all, Rockwell." Lassiter's deep voice came up from the camera compartment, cutting across Brad's thoughts. "I'm finished for the present. But keep circling a while longer. I may want another shot or two."

Brad snapped on the switch of the cockpit microphone. "O. K.," he responded. "I'll hold her."

Lassiter swung back the camera, removed the cartridge of exposed film and with it disappeared into his laboratory.

BRAD put the ship into a lazy climb and again glanced back toward the chart room. At that moment Claire Honeyman lifted her head. Her dark eyes met Brad's.

So far Brad had respected her reticence, had made not the slightest effort to overcome it. But now a sudden impulse lifted his hand in a beckoning gesture. He wanted a word with her; wanted to discover, if possible, what lay behind her aloofness.

She responded at once to his wordless summons, came out into the cockpit—a slender figure in white-silk blouse and tropic riding breeches, with polished brown boots incasing her shapely legs to the knee. She looked at Brad inquiringly.

Brad made sure the microphone switch was closed, then nodded at the vacant pilot's seat. She smiled and shook her head.

"I thought you wanted to learn to fly, thought you'd be keen to lay hand on the controls before we'd come this far," he said. "Changed your mind about my teaching you?"

"Yes," she told him quietly.

"Lassiter?" he hazarded.

She prisoned her lower lip in white

teeth, was for a moment silent. Then, with simple honesty: "Yes, Lassiter. I suppose I'm wrong in telling you this, but Lassiter is very fond of me—and unaccountably jealous. I shouldn't want to do anything that might anger him to the point of chucking over this project—— Oh, he would do it, I'm sure, if sufficiently aroused. You see, his success means so much to my father."

Impulsively her hand came out, rested lightly upon the sleeve of Brad's whipcord jacket—a brief contact that, despite himself, did thrill him deeply.

"You understand, don't you, Brad?"

Brad nodded.

And with a flash of grateful smile she turned and reentered the chart room, left him alone with his thoughts in conflict.

For the better part of an hour Lassiter remained secluded in his laboratory. Then he came out into the camera compartment, carefully replaced the cover of the spotting hatch, and ascended the companionway to the cockpit. His eyes were as inscrutable as ever, yet Brad fancied there was a gleam of hidden triumph far down in their gray-green depths.

Lassiter planted his bulk on the spare seat and called Brad's attention to a tiny streak of sunlit water, far below the ship and some eight or ten miles north of the spot where the camera had been centered.

"Set her down there, Rockwell," he said briefly. "I got what I wanted."

Brad dropped the ship easily; and twice he carefully "dragged" the spot chosen by Lassiter—a section of wide and sluggish jungle stream, visible for no more than two hundred yards along an open space in the mat of jungle green. Brad shook his head doubtfully.

"It's all right," asserted Lassiter impatiently. "Take it headed upstream and you'll make it without trouble. I know the spot well."

Brad's blue eyes narrowed with sudden thought. He remembered Lassiter's assertion that he'd had no opportunity to hunt for the giant *seringa* whence came the sap that made the native's *caucho* ball. How, then, could Lassiter be so familiar with a spot comparatively close to the object of his camera work? Queer! Brad's jaw hardened as he swung the ship in the windless air and drove her down.

With throttled motors the big craft swept majestically in across the vine-laced tops of towering trees. Brad dropped her sharply streamward, lifted her nose, and the twin floats made contact. Bright water feathered outward in long plumes of spray. Swiftly the big ship shot from sunshine into shadow, and a moment later came to rest in a dim tunnel formed by overarching branches, where sunlight filtered through and dropped aslant, like a translucent golden rain.

Lassiter indicated a spot on the high left bank of the stream—a natural clearing free of underbrush and ringed on three sides by seemingly impenetrable jungle walls.

"Camp site," he said briefly. "We'll drop anchor here and break out the equipment—and we'll have to step, if we hope to sleep ashore to-night."

He got down and moved away through the chart room, to carry the news of journey's end to Claire Honeyman and her father and Dr. Branch. Brad cut the motors, opened a sliding window at his elbow, and leaned out for a swift and curious survey of the surroundings.

Here, with the muffled drone of the big motors stilled, lay the all-pervading hush of a vaulted cathedral. No ripple broke the almost moveless flow of the oily stream; no chatter of monkey or scream of parrot disturbed the ear; and no movement of leaf or flicker of bright wing caught the eye.

Brad's reason told him that the sud-

den in-sweep of the big ship must have terrified and put to flight all wild life in the immediate vicinity. But, somehow, he could not dispel the clinging fancy that this deathlike hush so heavily enwrapping the jungles was ominous of sinister happenings to come.

V.

THE SUN was hard down before the last one of the light silk tents was pegged out in the jungle clearing, and the last small boatload of necessary supplies was ashore.

The camp was compactly arranged, in a semicircle facing the stream. Claire Honeyman had her own tent. Another stood close by for Lassiter's use. A third and larger tent, flanking Claire's on the opposite side, was ready for occupancy by Ross Honeyman and Dr. Branch. Brad and Shorty were assigned a fourth. And Huikima and Ah Foy—much to the snapping-eyed disgust of the latter—were cast together in a fifth.

The sixth shelter, much larger than any of the others, was to serve as cook-and-dining shelter. It stood hard by the small flow of a tiny spring-fed watercourse across the clearing. Before it a fire of wood collected by the native was burning cheerily, and Ah Foy was already engaged with his pots and pans.

At the moment Brad Rockwell was alone, standing withdrawn alongside the rearward jungle wall, surveying the camp with meditative eyes.

Claire had retired within her own tent to freshen up for supper. Her father and Dr. Branch and Lassiter were in conversation at the brow of the river bank. Shorty was out on the ship, whistling at his job of wiping down the big motors and adjusting their stout canvas hoods. Huikima, bareheaded and barefooted, clad in cotton trousers and singlet, was huddled on his heels close to the fire. The faintly impertinent

chatter of a returning monkey, bolder and more inquisitive than his fellows, came from somewhere high overhead.

Certainly peace did lie softly upon the camp. Yet Brad could not shake the persistent feeling that all was not well.

Particularly had he noticed the bearing of Huikima, the native. On every short foray beyond the clearing after firewood, there had been about the fellow an uneasy haste. Landing, quitting the ship for the solid footing of his own jungles, had not served to allay the obvious disquiet that filled the little brown man.

Brad was certain, now, that some dread beyond fear of the great roaring sky bird possessed the simple mind of Huikima, and he regretted that he did not share Lassiter's command of the native tongue, so that he might question the man. Even so, it was in Brad's mind soon to attempt it, for in overheard conversations between Lassiter and the native he had caught from Huikima's lips a syllable or two that remotely suggested a sort of garbled Portuguese.

There are times when a man may become so lost in perplexing thoughts that his feet will carry him without conscious volition. It was so with Brad Rockwell now. He began to pace backward and forward along the jungle wall, and ere long his steps were turned aside, into the mouth of a narrow game trail leading away into the bush.

For a little distance he followed it without heed; and then of a sudden his mind was jerked sharply back to realities. He stopped short, with upflung head, and listened for repetition of the faint sound that had caught his ear—a sound that was like the furtive movings of something in the trail-side bush ahead.

Not certain whether that sound had been made by beast or man, Brad stood rigid—as rigid as the trunk of the towering palm tree just at his shoulder.

Again came that soft, faint rustle from the dusky bush, a little way ahead and across the trail. And hard upon it a feathery whisper passed close by Brad's left ear and a sound of some light swift missile striking the tree.

Brad's swift glance stabbed sidelong at the palm, encountered there a brightly feathered shaft with its point embedded in the bark.

A prickle of apprehension lifted the short hairs upon his neck. Half his mind coiled swiftly around all that he had ever read or heard of poisoned darts and blood-hungry head-hunters; the other half was keen with realization that he was caught flat-footed, unarmed.

Reason pointed out the sheer folly of attempting flight. His stomach turned at thought of a twin to that feathered missile taking him in the back. He was certain, too, that his unseen assailant was but one man alone, else a shower of those stealthy messengers of death must have struck him down.

Responding to an ingrained belief in the efficacy of swift attack as a means of defense, he clenched his jaw and hurled himself headlong at the spot whence he fancied the whispering missile had come.

The tangled wall of the jungle all but stopped him, threw him back; but his momentum was sufficient to carry him plunging for a little distance within its dusky embrace, and there a snaky liana entwined his leg and threw him heavily.

He fought free of the entangling vine and lunged to his feet. In no direction could he see farther than two yards. Nor was there any sign of his assailant. With bated breath he listened. And faintly—so faintly that he was uncertain whether it was fact or fancy—he heard a sound that was like the rapid *thut-thut* of padded footfalls fast retreating along some hidden pathway.

A moment more, and deathlike silence reigned supreme.

For a short while, his every sense strained and alert, Brad remained motionless in the fast-darkening bush. Persistent in him was the belief that his lone assailant had fled; yet caution ruled him as he began quietly to push out toward the trail.

He reached it safely. Silence still endured. Except for the faintly visible splotch of color that was the feathered missile clinging to the palm tree's bole, there was no reminder that death had walked so close to him.

BRAD hastened to the tree, and gingerly he plucked away the feathered dart. A strange missile it was, the like of which Brad never had beheld.

Its shaft, some twelve or fourteen inches in length, was of hard wood polished to a glasslike smoothness. It was fletched with three bright scarlet feathers and footed with a neat insert of yellowed ivory. And the ivory was headed with a thin, sharp-pointed tip of some metal Brad could not identify.

Of one thing he was certain, however: No highly expert arrowsmith could have produced a finer piece of craftsmanship.

Upon the missile's ivory foot were faint traces of engraving; but for want of sufficient light Brad could not make out the design. Nor did he dare judge whether that strange metal tip bore some deadly poison.

Perhaps, he grimly thought as he bore it carefully toward the clearing, the man Lassiter could tell him something about that.

Fortunately—for Brad had no wish to alarm the others—supper was not yet ready and Lassiter was alone in his tent. The bright glow of Lassiter's small gasoline-pressure lantern must have revealed something unusual in Brad's countenance, for Lassiter asked quickly:

"What's up, Rockwell?"

For answer Brad quietly handed over

the missile he had plucked from the tree.

Lassiter examined it with a curiously avid gleam in his eyes. And at length demanded: "How came you by this, Rockwell!"

Brad told him in few words. Lassiter moved closer to the light. Keen interest was in the manner of his continued inspection of the missile.

"Poisoned, Lassiter?"

Lassiter shook his head, a trifle impatiently. "No, no, no. Not at all."

"Nevertheless," said Brad grimly, "I think it's high time you dealt out firearms. Don't you?"

A flicker of half-amused smile passed across Lassiter's bronzed countenance, and it was enough to light a flare of righteous anger in Brad.

"I must say you're a cool one, Lassiter. You seem more interested in that thing than concerned over my narrow shave—or over the safety of the rest."

"We're in no danger—for the present at least," said Lassiter. "If you think this thing presages an attack on us, you're wrong. If that *were* so—well, you wouldn't be standing here; you'd be lying out there in the bush with this pretty toy sticking in your neck. Think that over, Rockwell."

Brad realized the probable truth of Lassiter's assertion; realized that at twenty feet he must have been as easily hit as missed. Perplexity twisted in his mind.

"You mean the thing was in the nature of a warning, Lassiter? Mean that I was purposely missed?"

Lassiter nodded, fell again to intent study of the feathered missile. Particularly did those faint lines of engraving on the yellow-ivory foot hold his attention.

"Look here, Lassiter!" exclaimed Brad impatiently. "You may know what you're talking about, but that doesn't change my mind about the guns. I say——"

Lassiter's head came up abruptly. His eyes held Brad's for a moment. Then: "I *do* know what I'm talking about," he said quietly. "As for the guns, I've seen plenty of trouble caused by having weapons too handy for thoughtless use. When I consider them needed, I'll deal them out."

"I don't like it," declared Brad bluntly. "And I'm not thinking of myself, either." There's Miss Honeyman to consider."

Something like the passing of a cold wind across gray-green waters chilled the eyes of Lassiter; but his voice was quiet, almost deeply pleasant, as he said: "I've been watching you, Rockwell. You were taken on to pilot the ship, and so far you have attended strictly to your own business. Suppose you continue to do so, and allow me to direct the destinies of this expedition?"

For one brief moment Brad knew an insane desire to smash his knuckles fair in Lassiter's faintly mocking countenance. But memory of Claire's words up there in the ship's cockpit made him hold back. Without trusting himself to further words, he swung on his heel and strode from the tent.

And Lassiter, his eyes again alight with a peculiar avid eagerness, resumed his intent study of those faint characters graven on the ivory foot of the brightly feathered shaft.

They seemed to hold for Lassiter some compelling significance of their own.

VI.

BRAD ROCKWELL had no doubt that Lassiter would harbor resentment against him because of his persistence about the guns. But if this was so, Lassiter gave no indication of it; his manner during supper was distinctly affable.

At no time, however, did Lassiter mention the feathered shaft; nor did Brad himself speak of it, or of the guns;

he was reluctant to drop any word that might alarm the others.

After the meal was over, Lassiter went out alone to the big ship, carrying with him from his tent a rolled newspaper which Brad suspected was a mask for the feathered missile. For perhaps ten minutes the ports of the laboratory glowed with bright light. Then Lassiter returned, joined the party now seated around a camp fire on the river bank.

For a while the talk ran in casual channels. Then Ross Honeyman asked Lassiter his plans, and Lassiter declared that he meant to take the native, Hui-kima, and go upriver in one of the light boats on a hunt for the source of Hui-kima's caucho ball.

Honeyman found this good to speculate upon. And Dr. Branch quietly smoked a fragrant cigar and smiled at the rubber magnate's keen exuberance. And at length Claire rose and announced her intent to retire.

For a short while longer the men remained around the dying fire. Then by mutual consent the talk broke and each sought his own sleeping quarters.

Brad, however, was in no mood for sleep. Despite Lassiter's assurance that no danger threatened, Brad was possessed with definite uneasiness. At length he spoke quietly to Shorty, found the diminutive mechanic awake, and guardedly told him of what had happened out there in the bush. He admitted to Shorty his disquiet and told him of Lassiter's refusal to hand out weapons.

Between Brad and Shorty there was full agreement that a night watch should be maintained. Brad elected to stand the first two hours of it; bunched his bed roll at the entrance of the tent, behind the white drop of the mosquito bar, and sat down with his back against the blankets. Within three minutes Shorty was soundly sleeping.

Brad was tired, yet it was his firm in-

tention to maintain his vigil alone until the dawn. At first the natural voices of the huge dark night—the splash of an occasional fish somewhere out on the stream; the distant squeak of a monkey frightened in sleep; the faint, far cry of a jaguar on the prowl; and the all-pervasive serenade of winged insects—kept him well awake. But in the end these very sounds, grown familiar by constant repetition—these, and a greater weariness of body than he had realized—lulled him into drowsiness.

Thrice he caught himself nodding on the verge of sleep. Then, of sheer necessity, he awoke Shorty.

Brad slept, but his sleep was uneasy; it was filled with dim shapes and furtive figures moving—and of a sudden he came sharply awake.

The moon was up; against its faint silver light the mosquito bar hung like a thin white cloud—a cloud that shifted stealthily aside and dimly revealed a stocky little figure at the entrance of the tent, seemingly as naked as when born.

Swift in Brad's mind flashed the thought that Shorty must have fallen asleep on watch, and as swiftly as the coming of the thought, Brad lunged for the intruder.

His shoulder took the unknown's feet clean out from under. He toppled inward, sprawled full on Brad in the smothering dark of the tent. A split second later Brad's weight was atop the squirming body, wet and naked, and his hands were reaching for a throat hold.

"A-a-ah! Lay off, Brad!" It was Shorty's voice, a gasping whisper underneath Brad's ear. "Lay off!"

"Shorty! What the devil! Where have you been?"

"River," gasped Shorty. Then, relieved of Brad's weight; "I done swam out to the crate, nice and quiet. Figured we needed guns, and to hell with Lassiter! But that green-eyed devil

outguessed us, Brad—he's got both his laboratory doors locked!"

"H'm!" said Brad, and fell thoughtfully silent.

Shorty found his clothing in the dark, pulled on a garment or two. "How do you dope it, Brad?" he asked curiously.

"I don't," returned Brad grimly, "unless Lassiter figures lack of weapons will keep us tied close to camp, prevent us from trying to pry into whatever he's got up his sleeve."

"Oh, yeah?" commented Shorty; and for the remainder of the night—or until he fell asleep near dawn, leaving Brad watchfully alert—the mechanic maintained silence.

LASSITER was early astir. As the day broke Brad heard him quietly summon the native. Watching through the white screen of the mosquito bar, Brad saw Huikima paddle the scientist out to the big ship.

For a while Lassiter was busy at the task of attaching one of the outboards to the small boat and filling its tank with gas from the ship's auxiliary fuel supply. Then Lassiter boarded the amphibian, returned to the small boat carrying one of the high-power rifles.

The two men came ashore. Lassiter spoke some words of direction to the native. Huikima trotted away to the dining tent, disappearing within. Lassiter stood at the brow of the bank, gazing thoughtfully upriver.

Brad heard the rapid scuff of felt-soled slippers, saw Ah Foy going into the dining tent after the native. A moment later the little brown man came scuttling out like a scared rabbit; and he did not halt his flying legs until he had put the solid bulk of the surprised Lassiter between himself and the dining tent.

Lassiter rapped out a sharp question. Huikima shook his head, cower-

ing, palms outflung in a hopeless gesture of empty-handedness.

Anger flamed in Lassiter's countenance. His muscular fist lashed out, knocked the native flat. At him with the quickness of a jungle cat, Lassiter jerked him erect and propelled him back toward the dining tent with a vicious swing of a heavy boot.

Ten feet the native staggered, before he lost balance and fell sprawling. And there he lay, whimpering, more fearful of reëntering the tent than of Lassiter's oncoming fury.

Brad, his gorge lifted by Lassiter's display of wanton brutality, lunged to his feet with fists knotted. But before he could sweep aside the mosquito bar, another intervened in Huikima's behalf. Claire Honeyman, barefooted and with a light-silk robe clinging tightly about her shapely body, sped from her tent and threw herself stanchly between the prostrate native and Lassiter's anger.

Brad hesitated, deemed it better not to interfere. He clearly saw and distinctly heard what then took place.

Claire said no word, but the contempt in her dark eyes must have stung Lassiter like the lash of a whip. With something of an effort he took his anger in hand.

"I appreciate your motives, Claire," he said grimly. "But I assure you your sympathies are misdirected. I know how best to handle these little jungle devils."

"I don't believe any living creature needs that sort of handling," asserted Claire with controlled emphasis. "Not ever!"

Lassiter smiled, and the smile was a little forced. "Then it would appear," he said, "that I must run my own errands." And with that he strode on and entered the dining tent.

Claire stooped and gave Huikima's brown shoulder a reassuring pat; smilingly gestured him to rise. He did so; and for a brief moment his black eyes

rested with doglike devotion upon Claire Honeyman. Then his glance stabbed venomously at the dining tent, and he moved quickly away toward the waiting small boat.

Lassiter emerged with a small aluminum cooking pot in hand. On his bronzed countenance was half a smile—amusement overriding his anger of a moment before. The reason for it was apparent to Brad. Just within the entrance of the tent Ah Foy was standing. The round face of the Chinese cook was bland, but one yellow thumb was caressing the edge of a bright-steel carving knife. Brad suspected that Ah Foy had thus put to flight the native, surprised at meddling with the cooking dishes.

Brad shook his head thoughtfully. He could share none of Lassiter's obvious amusement. Brad felt the imminence of enough trouble brewing, without bad blood running in the expedition itself.

Claire had started for her own tent; a word from Lassiter delayed her.

"You'll please me, Claire, if you stay close around camp while I'm away."

"Why?" she asked quickly. "There's no danger, is there?"

"There's always the danger of—getting lost in the bush. Remember that, Claire. And pass the word on to the others."

Claire nodded, entered the tent. Lassiter moved on, descended the river bank. Shortly the muffled hum of the little outboard broke across the morning silence.

The sound awoke Shorty. He got up, stood beside Brad. Together they watched the small boat, with the native cowering in the bow and with Lassiter stolidly determined at the motor's steering handle, veer away and bear steadily upstream.

VII.

THE TREND of Shorty's own private thinking became apparent when, with

breakfast over and the other members of the expedition engaged upon concerns of their own, he quietly sculled out to the big ship in the remaining small boat, and there affixed the second outboard to her transom.

The sudden hum of the motor, off at full speed, caught Brad while fixing up their sleeping quarters. He sped to the river bank, gestured vigorously for Shorty to return. But the light craft was well under way, and all Brad got was an impudently reassuring wave of a big bright spanner in the hand of the reckless little mechanic.

Soberly Brad turned away from the river bank and found himself face to face with Clare.

"Where is he going?" she demanded, with a brief gesture at the disappearing boat. "I'm sure I made Lassiter's warning clear."

Brad was reluctant to inform her that Shorty had appointed himself a spy upon the moves of Lassiter, and he did not care to tell her an untruth. "I shouldn't worry about Shorty," he advised, with a smile that hid his own uneasiness. "One hardly can get lost upon a river."

She matched his smile with one of hers and agreed that he had spoken truth. And after a moment of inconsequential talk, she moved away and joined her father and Dr. Branch at the doorway of their tent.

If Brad's words had served to allay any disquiet that Claire might have felt, his own uneasiness increased as the idle day wore on without sign of Shorty's return. Had Shorty possessed one of the rifles locked in Lassiter's laboratory, Brad would have been less worried; but the thought of the possible hazards to be faced with nothing except the spanner for a weapon was more than disturbing.

Lassiter came back at the last edge of dusk, and the native with the aluminum pot filled with the viscous sap of

some girdled rubber tree. The scientist announced that one of the seringas had been found and that his experiments would go forward as soon as others were discovered.

Brad watched Lassiter guardedly. If the scientist had noticed Shorty's absence from camp, his manner gave no indication of it. Brad said nothing. It was Claire who called Lassiter's attention to the fact that Shorty was missing, when the party gathered for late supper.

Lassiter appeared surprised. He quickly asked in which direction Shorty had gone, and when Claire told him, he disclaimed having encountered either the boat or the mechanic on the river.

"Shorty must have put ashore somewhere and lost himself in the bush," he said; and he added, with a hard, sharp glance at Brad: "I rather expected something like this might happen."

"I passed your word along, but Shorty disregarded it," said Claire. "Isn't there something we can do—fire signal shots, or something?"

"If Shorty doesn't show up soon," put in Brad determinedly, "I shall go hunt for him."

"Neither would be of use," declared Lassiter. "You don't know what the bush is like at night, Rockwell; it's all but impenetrable. The sane and only thing to do is wait for daylight. I'll see what can be done then."

Brad, and all the others, realized the truth of Lassiter's assertion. His judgment prevailed. But despite the scientist's prediction that Shorty either would turn up himself, or would be found on the morrow none the worse for a lonely night in the bush, a weight of inward alarm lay heavily upon Brad.

So when the others at length sought their tents, Brad remained on the river bank alone, pacing uneasily forward and back, eyes trying vainly to pierce the upriver dark, ears alert to catch the

first faint hum of the returning outboard.

But no sound other than the jungle's own voices broke the slow-dragging hours. And at last the moon rose and sailed high, and a wide silver beam fingered down through some interstices among the tangled lofty branches and touched like a mellow spotlight upon the oily stream.

And it was then, moved solely by the slow pull of the current, that the missing small boat silently appeared from out of the upriver dark, drifting broadside.

Brad stared with eyes unwilling to believe. And the light craft swirled slowly across the patch of moonlit waters. The hang of the outboard was bright upon her transom, but within her hull was no visible sign of occupant.

Brad waited for nothing more. Nerves queerly prickling, he swiftly rid himself of his shoes, and took the river in a clean fast dive. Powerful overhand strokes carried him to intercept the derelict.

Fair abreast of the camp, where filtered moonlight cast a faintly luminous glow upon the waters, he caught the drifting boat. And as he flung an arm across the midships gunwale, his hand encountered a body lying flat and rigid at the bottom.

Brad needed no look to tell him that here was Shorty returned and that life was long since gone. But he lifted himself and peered across the gunwale; and when by faint moonlight he saw the rigid countenance so close to his, his breath came sharp with gasping horror.

Brad had seen dead men before, and it was not death itself that horrified him. Rather, it was the imprint death had left behind—strange death, lending to its victim a marble cast of features that was gruesome to behold.

FOR A MOMENT beads of cold sweat stood out upon Brad's river-wet brow, and his tongue clove against the dry roof of his mouth. Then he took hold upon his emotions, broke the grip of horror by exertion. Swimming, he reached shore with the grim-laden boat.

Brad tried to awaken the menfolk without disturbing Claire. But Claire must have heard the tense conversation outside her tent, for she spoke quickly, wanted to know what the trouble was.

Brad told her, and she uttered a subdued gasping cry; she dressed in haste and joined the others, watching wide-eyed while they brought the body of Shorty ashore and carried it within the dining tent.

When lights were made and Ross Honeyman had his first clear look at the dead man, his nerves let go and he shook like one with palsy. So great was his agitation that Dr. Branch administered a sedative to him. The rubber magnate then retired to his tent, and Claire went with him, visibly shaken.

Of the three remaining with the body—Brad and Lassiter and Dr. Branch—Lassiter alone appeared unmoved in the manner men usually are moved by the presence of death. Rather, there was a curiosity almost ghoulish in the way he hovered close at the side of Dr. Branch while the doctor strove to determine the cause of Shorty's dying.

As the doctor proceeded with his minute examination of the body, it was evident that his professional curiosity was mounting. Wholly absorbed, he spoke no word until the end, and then he requested Lassiter and Brad in turn to bend close above the dead man's marble-white features and sniff the faint and puzzling aroma that clung about the bloodless lips.

It was an odor sweetly pungent and wholly undefinable, yet one that Brad was certain he never could forget.

Once more Dr. Branch smelled that

mysterious aroma, and then his tall spare figure straightened, and one hand tugged nervously at his iron-gray Vandyke.

"Gentlemen, I'm baffled," he admitted. "At first I suspected some strange poison—that faint odor about the lips, you know. But I'm not aware of any poison that can utterly consume the blood in a man's body. It's gone, gentlemen, drained away, every drop—and not a wound or mark can I find to show how it was done."

There fell a silence, an awesome silence, broken only by the soft persistent hissing of the pressure lanterns. Lassiter's gray-green eyes were inscrutable.

"Dr. Branch! Oh, Dr. Branch!" Claire's agitated voice came from outside the tent. "Please come and see what you can do for my father. He hasn't quieted at all!"

The doctor went out at once. Lassiter stood for a moment looking down at the dead man, and then he swung and found Brad's eyes upon him, cold and hard.

"It's a devilish piece of work, Lassiter!" exclaimed Brad tensely. "You should be proud of it!"

Dark passion rode across Lassiter's bronzed countenance. It seemed as if every sinew of his compact body rippled and bunched—seemed as if he was upon the verge of hurling himself upon Brad. Brad stiffened defensively; but the threatened attack did not materialize.

Instead, Lassiter said: "Ignorance, Rockwell! I did not kill him."

"Perhaps not directly," retorted Brad bitterly. "But the responsibility is yours—the guns, you know. If poor Shorty had been armed, he might have had a chance against whatever hellish fate overtook him out there in the jungles."

"It wouldn't have happened," shot back Lassiter, "if my warning had not been disregarded. I'm no fool, Rockwell, and I've a pretty good idea why

Shorty trailed me upriver—perhaps at your suggestion.”

“I tried to stop him,” declared Brad. “But if I’d had the chance I should have gone myself. You need watching, Lassiter. You’re up to something—and it has cost one life already. Heaven knows who the next victim will be, if you’re not stopped!”

Slowly, deliberately, almost pityingly, Lassiter smiled. “Anything I start, Rockwell, I finish,” he declared softly. “Besides, I couldn’t let Honeyman down, you know.”

“Rot!” said Brad bluntly. “I’m not quite a fool, either; you’ve got something besides rubber on your mind.”

The smile passed swiftly away from Lassiter’s face. He frowned, and his eyes seemed to search Brad through and through.

“You’re right, Rockwell,” he said abruptly. “And since I’ve an idea you’re going to be damned annoyingly meddlesome until you find out what it is, I might as well take you into my confidence. I——”

The returning footfalls of Dr. Branch checked Lassiter. He swung close to Brad, and his whisper carried clear:

“Say nothing, Rockwell, but get into dry clothing and join me at my laboratory in half an hour. I’ll satisfy your curiosity—and astound you, too.”

VIII.

Close at the end of the appointed half hour Brad emerged from his tent. The dining shelter was darkened now, the flap tied down. But a lantern was still burning in Honeyman’s tent, and through its thin silk walls filtered subdued conversation—Honeyman’s voice, and the voice of Dr. Branch, with now and then a quiet word from Claire.

Lassiter had gone out to the ship; the laboratory ports were bright in the pre-dawn darkness.

Also there was light in the tent shared

by the cook and the native; the flap was up, revealing no occupant behind the transparency of the mosquito bar. Brad encountered Ah Foy on the river bank, placidly smoking a cigarette. There was no sign of Huikima anywhere.

Brad wondered if Lassiter had taken the native with him aboard the amphibian; he inquired this of Ah Foy.

The Chinese chuckled softly and made reply in a tongue that was as correctly fluent as any white man’s: “Lassiter is alone, Mr. Rockwell. That little brown whelp is not in camp—for some unknown reason he refused to enter my tent to-night. Strange, is it not, that he should desert the comforts of blankets under silk, probably to sleep like a monkey in some hidden jungle tree?”

“Doubtless he considers it safer,” commented Brad grimly; “perhaps in more ways than one!”

“Perhaps,” agreed Ah Foy. “But when Death rolls the dice, man is helpless. He lives his little hour, and then nothing——”

“Never mind the philosophy,” cut in Brad impatiently. “I’ve a job for you, Ah Foy. I’m going out to the ship for a while, and I want you to keep sharp watch over Honeyman’s tent. If there’s a stir of anything suspicious around camp, yell your head off. Understand?”

“Perfectly,” said Ah Foy; and he moved soundlessly away to hover watchfully in the vicinity of the tent.

Brad descended the river bank, swept the beam of his pocket flash along the edge of the stream. Lassiter had taken the boat in which he had made his own upriver trip. The other, from which the body of Shorty had lately been removed, awaited Brad’s use.

As Brad stepped aboard the craft, he made a startling discovery: Lying on the bottom of the boat—where it must have been placed to accompany Shorty on his drift of death, and where it must have remained unnoticed while his body

was being removed—was another of those mysterious feathered shafts.

Grim-jawed, Brad carried it with him aboard the ship and there exhibited it to Lassiter. It was exactly like the missile which yesterday had come winging through the jungle dusk, and Lassiter examined it with the same avid eagerness he had displayed at his first view of the other. So deeply and so long was he engrossed that Brad's patience broke bounds.

"What do you make of it, Lassiter?" he demanded. "A warning, like the other?"

Lassiter looked up, and there was a cryptic smile upon his lips, and a gleam of satisfaction deep in his eyes.

"Sit down, Rockwell. I've something to show you before we talk of these."

"Before I sit down, or before we talk, I want one of those rifles," asserted Brad determinedly. "I notice you didn't go unarmed to-day."

Lassiter shrugged. "Help yourself, if it will make you feel any easier in mind."

Brad needed no second invitation. From the gun cabinet he selected one of the high-power rifles and a box of ammunition to fit. He filled the magazine, racked a cartridge into the chamber, and stood the weapon alongside the doorway. Then, considerably relieved, he sat down in Lassiter's big leather chair.

Lassiter put the feathered shaft aside, took from one of the numerous wall compartments a small sheaf of prints.

"Here's what I caught with the camera, Rockwell. You're aware, I suppose, how such an instrument shows up traces of unsuspected things—things like old, and overgrown roads, or long-abandoned fortifications, or ancient ruins?"

Brad nodded. Lassiter handed him the prints. He scanned them carefully, and each revealed faint and broken

traces of some shadowy and indefinable design.

"If you'll let your mind's eye connect those broken bands of shadow——" suggested Lassiter.

Brad followed that suggestion; and it was not very difficult to determine the pattern caught by the camera's lens—a series of shadowy concentric bands centering a blur of solidity. The whole resembled nothing quite so much as an enormous but crudely fashioned target, with that central blur its bull's-eye.

Brad shook his head in puzzlement and disclaimed any knowledge of what the thing might be. But his curiosity was keenly whetted.

LASSITER had begun to pace the narrow confines of the laboratory; and his were the eyes of a man who is seeing far visions.

"As to its exact location, Rockwell, one man's guess has always been as good as another's. But the picture has come changeless down the ages. Plato wrote of it, for one; his ancestor Solon had word of it from Egyptian priests.

"A series of islands, Rockwell, one within the other—supposedly created by Neptune as a home for Cleito his beloved. First a hill, inclosed by a ring of water. Then a ring of land and another ring of water, until there were nine of each.

"Here ruled Atlas, son of Cleito and Neptune. He had canals dug and water bridged. And great docks were built, and his ships sailed all over the Atlantic, and fabulous riches rewarded his commerce.

"His people dwelt in houses of red-and-black stone, roofed with shining copper. And on the central island were two magnificent temples. One, dedicated to Cleito and Neptune, was surrounded by a wall of gold. The other, for worship of Neptune alone, had walls of silver and golden pinnacles and a roof of ivory, copper, gold, and silver.

And it housed a statue of Neptune driving six winged horses——"

Lassiter broke his words short, strode to Brad and with a sinewy forefinger tapped the uppermost of the prints.

"Count them, Rockwell! Count those concentric bands of shadow!"

Brad counted them; and they totaled nine.

"Can't you see it, Rockwell, plain as day! *It's the shadow of Atlantis!*"

Brad said: "Are you completely mad? Are you trying to convince me that here in the jungles is the site of lost Atlantis?"

"No, no—not the original Atlantis. But can you say it was impossible for a band of migrants to have sailed their ships up the Amazon and at length established here a colony built to the same pattern but on smaller scale?"

Brad eyed Lassiter as if indeed he suspected that the bronzed scientist was mad.

"It's too incredible a supposition to swallow, Lassiter. Too utterly fantastic for belief."

"I believe it," declared Lassiter with curt finality. "You yourself have already seen two concrete specimens of proof, but you don't realize it. I'll show you a third."

He swung back to the wall compartment, drew forth the first shaft with the scarlet feathers and with it the forefront section of another, broken short midway of its ivory footing.

"I had this broken piece from Hui-kima, along with his caucho ball. It's the thing that put me on the trail, Rockwell—this, and some things the native told me."

Despite his skepticism, despite his belief that Lassiter's shadow of Atlantis was nothing other than the handiwork of some native tribe, laid down in such pattern by mere coincidence, Brad's interest was strangely stirred.

Lassiter placed in Brad's hand the broken shaft, and he discerned upon its

remnant of yellowed ivory the same faint traces of engraving that the worn footings of the others bore. But so timeworn were the fine thin lines that his eye was baffled.

Lassiter handed him a powerful reading glass. Through the lens the graven characters leaped clear; and Brad was astonished to find them classic Greek—and the name they formed was none other than "Atlantis."

"Enough, isn't it," queried Lassiter, "to set any man to thinking?"

Brad nodded, wordless. Lassiter took away the piece of broken shaft, replaced it with one intact, and Brad saw revealed the full inscription: "Red Guards of Atlantis."

Brad shook his head in sheer amazement. For a moment his thoughts ran riot. And then he grimly said: "So your story of the rubber was pure fiction, Lassiter. A stall to get yourself a flying laboratory, for some purpose of your own."

"On the contrary," said Lassiter with surprising calm, "my story of the rubber is a true one. Those trees do exist. Honeyman shall startle the world in his way, and I shall startle it in mine."

"By the discovery of temples of gold and silver here in the jungles?" asked Brad curiously.

Swiftly there came to dwell in the gray-green eyes of Lassiter an expression of almost fanatical determination.

"Temples, yes—but whether of gold and silver does not matter. Consider, Rockwell, the vastly more important arts and attainments of old Atlantis. Is it not conceivable that this colony of migrants possessed secrets of incalculable value to one fortunate enough to discover them to-day? The tips of these feathered shafts—tempered copper, Rockwell. An art long lost and one I expect to rediscover in my laboratory. Who knows what others I may find!"

"I suppose," said Brad grimly, "that the killing of Shorty was a demonstra-

tion of one of those ancient arts."

"Undoubtedly—and one that may astound the medical world. You saw how Dr. Branch was baffled."

"And you intend to carry on, Lassiter, in the face of that hellish warning that these people—whoever they may be—do not wish their privacy invaded?"

"Of course," declared Lassiter. "Shorty blundered into their hands without knowledge that is mine. That warning does not deter me. Why, these people possess one secret alone that *nothing*—nothing, Rockwell—shall prevent me from solving. An astounding secret of levitation! Think of it, Rockwell—an unknown force that can raise a great stone idol free and clear from a temple floor!"

"How do you know?" asked Brad. "Have you seen——"

"No, no! But Huikima saw it. He blundered upon this place in the jungles, and for safety hid himself in one of the temples. He escaped during a terrific electrical storm; but not before the lightning had shown him the great sacrificial idol rising——"

A wild unearthly yell, muffled by the ship's metal walls but trenchant with utter terror, drove out from shore and cut sharp across Lassiter's talk.

Hard upon it—and this second cry was unmistakably the voice of Claire—came a high-pitched scream of horror.

IX.

BRAD was first to move. With one swift leap he left the chair. Two strides and he was past Lassiter and within reach of the loaded rifle. Weapon in hand, he lunged for the outer doorway of the ship.

Dawn was just breaking over the jungles. Its gray light revealed Claire Honeyman standing rigid in the entrance of her father's tent. She had pushed aside the mosquito bar, was holding fast to the thin fabric with one

hand. The back of her other hand was pressed hard against her lips.

Her eyes, wide with horror, were fixed upon Ah Foy.

The Chinese was standing a short way to the left of the entrance of the tent, standing on wide-apart legs, swaying a little to and fro. His usually bland face was twisted now in a grimace of terror. His hands were clawing at his throat—clawing futilely at some tiny white object that seemed clinging like a venomous insect upon his yellow skin.

This much Brad's startled eyes beheld, and nothing more. There was no sound or sign of hostile presence in or about the camp clearing. Yet Brad was certain Death had rolled the number of Ah Foy.

Even as that certainty came to Brad, the Chinese crumpled. All asprawl he fell, and lay motionless—queerly like some grotesque marionette whose animating strings have suddenly been struck free.

"Back in the tent, Claire!" Brad's cry was sharp with urgency. "Get back inside!"

Her gaze lifted, swung, encountered him standing with ready rifle in the ship's doorway. She drew back hastily, and the mosquito bar dropped softly into place.

Brad's keen glance swept the jungle wall, forward and back, alertly. But no sign of any target for the rifle met his eye.

"Come on, Lassiter!" Brad threw back hurriedly across his shoulder. "Grab a rifle and let's be ashore!"

"Go ahead," said Lassiter. "I'm always armed."

Brad wheeled, noticed for the first time the inconspicuous bulge of an arm-pit holster under Lassiter's khaki jacket. Wordless, Brad swung out for one of the small boats, Lassiter following. And as they shoved smartly away from the ship, Lassiter said:

"What I have told you is for you alone, Rockwell. I shall expect you to keep it to yourself."

Brad nodded; in the stress of the moment gave his promise heedlessly.

Shore was quickly reached. And when Brad topped the river bank he saw that Dr. Branch, true to his professional ethics, had quit the shelter of the tent and was kneeling beside the stricken cook.

As Brad drew near quickly, with Lassiter at his heels, the doctor got grimly to his feet. In his hand—and held most gingerly—was that white thing Brad had seen clinging to the neck of Ah Foy. Brad did not pause to see what it might be.

"Back inside, doctor! Quick now—don't be reckless!"

Without a word Dr. Branch swung back into the tent. Brad stood aside while Lassiter followed. Then Brad himself took shelter, stationed himself close behind the mosquito bar.

Nothing stirred about the jungle clearing.

Brad saw that Honeyman was sleeping, breathing with measured heaviness, his face flushed. It was evident that the rubber magnate was deep within the benign embrace of some powerful sedative.

Near by stood Claire. A flow of color had come back to her cheeks, but her dark eyes were still wide with the horror just witnessed.

"What is it, Dr. Branch?" she exclaimed breathlessly. "What terrible thing has happened to Ah Foy?"

GRIMLY the doctor exhibited the missile he had plucked from the throat of the Chinese. It was a small dart, crudely fashioned from a triangular section of split bamboo and tufted with a white wad of jungle cotton. Brad's nostrils were suddenly aware of a faint aroma that was like the essence of bitter almonds.

"Hydrocyanic acid," announced the doctor briefly. "A very swift and deadly poison."

Claire shuddered.

Brad shot Lassiter a quick sharp look. "Queer stuff to encounter on the tip of a native dart! I had an idea they used snake venom—or isn't that a native dart, Lassiter?"

Lassiter nodded; but before he could speak, Dr. Branch cut in with blunt vigor:

"You'll have to call it off, Lassiter. We've a sick man on our hands now. Moreover, this hell hole is no place for Claire. The quicker we're away, the better."

Lassiter frowned. And Dr. Branch swung to Brad.

"What do you say?"

Brad looked at Claire. Her dark eyes were sorely troubled. He inquired of the doctor: "Do you consider Mr. Honeyman dangerously ill?"

"No. Only a touch of fever. I can pull him through it here as well as any place. But I say we'd better get out before we've all gone the way of Shorty and Ah Foy—or before our heads decorate some jungle hut."

Claire shivered. "Dr. Branch is right," she said reluctantly. "It will disappoint father keenly, but we'd better go. I——"

"Just a moment," cut in Lassiter. "This is no time to let groundless panic disrupt our plans. Has any one of you seen anything of Huikima this morning?"

Claire shook her head, and so did Dr. Branch. And Brad quickly repeated what the Chinese had told him at the river bank.

Lassiter smiled a little grimly. "You needn't fear any attack by head-hunters, doctor. It was Huikima who killed Ah Foy."

"Huikima!" echoed Claire, her countenance aghast.

Lassiter nodded. "He's a child of the

jungles, Claire. He feared Ah Foy and hated him. There's your answer—that dart in the doctor's hand. I know, because Huikima fashioned half a dozen of them yesterday while we were upriver, and a small blow gun."

"And I suppose," commented Brad grimly, "that you furnished him with the hydrocyanic acid."

"Of course," admitted Lassiter readily. "I gave it to him last night; but I assure you I didn't suspect he meant to use it on our cook. He told me he was afraid of Ah Foy and that he meant henceforth to sleep alone in the deep bush. For protection against prowling beasts he chose the weapon he knows best—the poisoned dart. Simple enough, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Dr. Branch. "But there is still the matter of Shorty's death to consider. That in itself is gruesome enough to sustain my contention—that we should lose no time in getting away from here."

"Not only that!" put in Claire with a shudder. "I shouldn't know an easy moment, with Huikima and his poisoned darts around. A murderer in our midst—ugh!"

"Oh, come now, Claire," expostulated Lassiter, smiling. "We're not dealing with civilized ethics. According to his own reasoning, Huikima is not a murderer—he has merely removed an enemy he feared might kill him first. You see, Ah Foy chased him from the cook tent yesterday morning with a butcher knife."

"But poor Ah Foy—why, he wouldn't have hurt a fly!"

"You may know that, Claire, but Huikima did not. However, you needn't worry about him and his poisoned darts. I'll destroy those darts and see that he gets no poison for any others."

"As for Shorty—he encountered misfortune somewhere far upriver. The manner of it I don't know. But I am certain that we're safe enough here."

Shorty's death was no more than a warning, that those upriver reaches should be avoided."

"But you have dared them," objected Claire. "And you'll have to dare them again, if we do stay."

"There's no need to be concerned over my safety, Claire. I know how to take care of myself. You see, I am familiar with the ways of the jungles, where the rest of you are not."

"I should like to stay, for father's sake," said Claire thoughtfully. And then, on sudden impulse of trust, she turned to Brad. "Do you think, Brad, it would be too dangerous to stay?"

Brad did not miss the quickly smothered flame of anger that flickered in the depths of Lassiter's eyes—anger that Claire had directed her appeal to another's final judgment.

"I trust not," Brad told her quietly. "Not if we should move your father out to the ship and stay close there ourselves."

Claire nodded, well relieved. Dr. Branch added his approval, although a little grudgingly.

Lassiter's tight lips relaxed. "Now that's settled, I'm going out in the bush after that little jungle devil of mine," he declared, and swung toward the entrance of the tent. "He's got to pay for what he's done."

Claire hastened after Lassiter, stopped him with a quick hand upon his arm. "You're not going to—to punish him, are you?" she inquired anxiously.

"Yes, in a way," Lassiter told her grimly. "I'm going to make him sweat at digging a grave for his victim—and one for Shorty, too."

Still Claire's hand detained the scientist. Plainly she was aware of his smoldering anger, was anxious to appease it. "You haven't said what you think of Brad's suggestion," she reminded him. "Of course if you——"

"I think it's a capital idea," he told her, smiling broadly now. "Only," he

added with a poorly concealed touch of irony in his voice, "I'm afraid your decision to stay on will prove rather confining to Rockwell—in addition to the watchfulness I'm sure he intends to maintain, he'll have to do the cooking."

Brad watched Lassiter's departure with gravely thoughtful eyes, and of a sudden a startling thought catapulted through his mind. Was it possible, he grimly asked himself, that Lassiter cold-bloodedly had inspired the killing of Ah Foy as a means to tie Brad close to camp with the burden of the dead cook's work?

X.

ANXIOUS days followed on the abandonment of the tents for the closer confines of the amphibian. For Ross Honeyman proved a sicker man than Dr. Branch had anticipated. Claire was almost constantly beside him, and Dr. Branch. Brad snatched cat naps when he could, between preparing meals in the galley and maintaining lonely armed guard through the dark hours.

The strain began to tell upon them all—all except Lassiter.

Early each morning the scientist, accompanied by Huikima, went upriver in one of the small boats. Usually it was full dark before they returned. Once Lassiter brought back another small quantity of latex; but upon all other occasions, so far as Brad could see, he returned empty-handed.

But never an evening passed that Lassiter, after brief sociability with the others, did not early seek the solitude of his constantly locked laboratory. To all intents and purposes, his attention was wholly engrossed upon experiments with the latex. He maintained an attitude of aloof and deliberate calm. Each night's return found him more curt of speech, more deeply absorbed in thought. His sinewy hands displayed an unwonted impatience in their movements.

When the others had retired and Brad was alone with his rifle in the dark silence of the lounging cabin, he could hear below him the heavy tread of Lassiter pacing, pacing endlessly, his laboratory floor. If ever a man betrayed the growth of burning impatience against some unrevealed restraint, that man was Lassiter.

Claire spoke to Brad upon the matter one morning as they stood for a moment together in the control cockpit, watching the small boat away along the upriver tunnel of high greenery.

"He is changing, Brad," she said thoughtfully. "Sometimes, when I see that look of awful determination deep in his eyes—well, it almost makes me shiver. It must be too much concentration on his rubber experiments that is getting him, don't you think?"

Brad hesitated. He suspected differently, and was honest enough to want to say so; but his word had been given to Lassiter. Above that, no good could be served at present by revealing Lassiter's divided interests. So Brad hesitated.

He was saved from any manner of reply by the appearance of Dr. Branch.

"Your father has passed the crisis, Claire," he announced. "The fever has broken, and from now on he'll mend so rapidly as to surprise you."

True to the doctor's prediction, Honeyman's improvement was rapid, so much so that at the end of two days he expressed vast disgust at canned broths and demanded to set his teeth in a good red steak.

Dr. Branch spoke of it at supper, with regret that none was to be had.

Lassiter, betraying a quickened interest, declared smilingly: "That should be easy. Some two miles below here, where the river makes a sharp bend, there is a sandy point. If Rockwell should go down there about noon tomorrow with his rifle and remain hidden quietly in the bush, he'd be more than

likely to see a deer come out to drink."

"Oh, wouldn't that be thrilling!" exclaimed Claire. "I'd love to go with you, Brad—I've been cooped up here so long."

"I know you'd welcome some diversion," said Lassiter quickly. "But the chance of your father getting his steak will be much surer if Rockwell hunts alone. You see, these jungle deer are exceedingly shy creatures."

"If there are any deer," put in Dr. Branch. "You'd better go alone, Rockwell. I want my patient satisfied."

Brad nodded. "But why at noon, Lassiter? It has been my experience that the wild ones usually come to water at dusk."

"Quite true," agreed Lassiter. "I suggest noon, because that will give you time to get well placed and maintain a long spell of quiet. By dusk the sound of your arriving outboard will have been forgotten by your intended quarry."

So the matter was settled. And at noon next day Brad went alone downriver and hid himself well in the bush overlooking the sand point.

SINCE the moment of Ah Foy's killing, the jungle had presented nothing more than a serene and smiling face. Yet despite that fact, a vague uneasiness lay disturbingly upon Brad. He told himself, as he waited out the dragging hours, that had it not been for Honeyman's keen desire for fresh meat, he never would have left the ship.

A vast impatience to return was in him. And when at the fringe of dusk a small doe trod daintily into view, he brought her down with a single well-placed shot. He lost no time in halving the carcass and loading the hind quarters into the boat. Back toward camp he drove with the throttle of the outboard open wide.

Lassiter's boat was still absent when Brad pulled alongside the big amphibian. As he was making fast to the

starboard hull, Dr. Branch appeared in the ship's doorway.

"What luck?" he asked.

Brad told him. And then, "Where's Claire?" he asked, for he had expected her to be the first on hand to learn the result of his hunting.

"Why, Lassiter came back a little after noon—not long after you had left," the doctor told him. "It seems he has stumbled on some ancient ruins, or something like that, upriver. He thought Claire might like to see them. I told her she'd better go. She went with Lassiter."

Brad felt closing about him an invisible hand of alarm. He said no word, but his countenance must have betrayed him; for the doctor quickly said:

"There's no need for worry, Brad. She is in capable hands. Why, they'll be back before we realize it, and if you'll hustle that venison aboard, we'll have a royal supper waiting for them."

Brad tried to tell himself that all would indeed be well; that Dr. Branch was right in his prediction; but his feeling of alarm was doggedly persistent and would not down.

When full dark came, and the evening began to wear away without sign of the boat's returning, and the supper—except Honeyman's juicy portion—had grown stone-cold with waiting, Dr. Branch himself was forced to confess disquiet.

For a while Ross Honeyman was querulous in his complaints at Claire's continued absence. But at last he fell asleep, and Dr. Branch joined Brad in the lounging cabin. They sat together in the oppressive dark, each by an open window, listening for some sound to relieve the jungle stillness.

But none came. And midnight at length came. And at last the doctor, whose powers of endurance were less rugged than Brad's, had to give over his vigil. He went to bed, leaving Brad alone on watch.

Each moment of the slowly dragging hours was for Brad an eternity of torment. The thought that Claire might have fallen victim to the gruesome doom that had been Shorty's near drove him frantic. But there was nothing he could do against the jungle dark; it bound him to the ship with chains of moon-shot blackness.

Dawn came at last to temper darkness with a wash of eerie gray. And through it Brad caught a glimpse of a sudden stir of movement at the far end of the shoreward clearing.

From the jungle wall—from the mouth of the jungle trail whereon Brad had made his acquaintance with the first of those brightly feathered shafts—burst Huikima. The little brown man was staggering like one far spent. Brad could hear the breath whistling and sobbing in the man's dusky throat.

Huikima's gaze was upon the ship, as upon a goal most desperately sought. He glimpsed Brad at the open window of the cabin, and he tried to shout, but no sound came above his labored breathing. He staggered on, achieved the river bank, and his brown arms gestured an urgent summons.

Brad waited for no more. Rifle in hand, he lunged down the narrow companionway stairs and took the small boat at a bound.

No sooner had the craft touched shore, than Huikima tumbled in. Brad was alert for pursuit to show, but the little brown man's attention was not for the backward trail—he gestured wildly upriver, as if urging Brad to go with speed, and a torrent of words rioted from his gasping lips.

Native talk, it was, unintelligible at first, but with an increasingly definite snatch of Portuguese here and there crowding through. Brad managed at last to catch the words "White woman!"—and these, he knew, could mean no one but Claire.

With these two words was another—

a word which harried him with its elusiveness. But of a sudden he caught its meaning, and his blood ran cold and hot, and cold again with horror.

For in that one word was all the hidden savagery of those upriver jungle reaches. The one word: "Sacrifice!"

XI.

BRAD had no thought beyond the peril facing Claire. With savage haste he spun the outboard into life; at top speed headed the light craft upriver.

Above the motor's muffled drone Brad tried to make talk with Huikima, tried to learn definitely what had happened up yonder in the dark heart of the jungles. But the native, with his immediate purpose achieved, would talk no more. He crouched in the bow, eyes for nothing except the opening reaches of the stream.

It seemed to Brad as if snakes of fear were tightly coiled about the heart and tongue of Huikima. His was the bearing of a man who sees ahead some awful doom, yet is fearfully determined to give his best until the end.

Brad guessed that loyalty built upon a patted shoulder and a friendly morning smile had driven Huikima back to him with word of Claire's great peril.

Of Lassiter, of what grim fate might have overtaken the scientist, or be in store for him, Brad thought but little. For had Lassiter been content to heed his own warning, Claire would still be safely sleeping on the ship.

For an hour the small boat, with twin walls of impenetrable bush sliding past like endless ribbons of green unwinning, plowed steadily the dark slow waters of the jungle stream. Then on either hand, with increasing frequency, began to appear breaks in the jungle wall—dark outlets of swamplike lagoons steaming under the morning sun.

At length Huikima gestured toward the mouth of one of these openings, and

Brad swung the boat's nose that way. With throttled motor the craft slid beneath overhanging branches, and Brad found himself in a narrow channel that wound sluggishly onward into the jungle's dark heart.

A lively unrest was now apparent in the native. Brad drove the boat cautiously, one hand on the steering grip and the other alertly ready to seize his rifle should need arise.

Five minutes, and the boat rounded an abrupt bend. Huikima uttered a subdued cry of warning. Just ahead, resting broadside of the bank, Brad beheld a long, low dugout lying. The craft was empty; but swiftly Brad cut the motor's ignition and reached for his rifle.

"Drop it, Rockwell—you're covered!" Lassiter's deep voice boomed out from the bush close at hand. "Drop it, I say!"

The rifle fell clattering on the bottom of the boat. Brad swung his head, saw Lassiter emerging from the bush to a clear space along the bank. And Lassiter's hands were empty. This much Brad saw, and swiftly he reached to recover his rifle.

But before his hand could touch the weapon, a whispering streak of scarlet passed his vision and struck with a sharp thud against the inner gunwale of the boat and quivered gently there.

Brad recoiled in sheer amazement, for that whispering missile was another of those brightly feathered jungle shafts.

Lassiter laughed harshly. "I told you you were covered, didn't I? Perhaps you believe it now—or would you like to make another try for that rifle?"

Brad's mind spun, the while his startled eyes swept the jungle wall behind Lassiter. There was no sign of man or weapon there; yet Brad was certain any overt move would bring another swift shaft winging.

"I've been expecting you, Rockwell,"

said the scientist grimly. "Been expecting you ever since I discovered the absence of that damned native."

He ripped a sharp command to Huikima. Cowering in abject terror, the little brown man reached back and grasped Brad's rifle, quickly dropped it overboard.

"I don't suppose you've got a pistol on you, Rockwell—or did you break into my laboratory and help yourself? But no matter—come ashore and I'll find out for myself. And be very careful, if you don't want my friends back here in the bush to make a pretty pin-cushion of you."

There was nothing Brad could do except obey. But as he stepped ashore past the brown huddle of Huikima, his blue eyes were flaming dangerously. Plainly Lassiter somehow had wormed his way into the graces of those whose feathered shafts were inscribed: "Red Guards of Atlantis." And this conviction was enough on which to build the grim certainty that Lassiter was deliberately responsible for the impending doom of Claire.

"Where is she, Lassiter?" he demanded sharply. "What have you done with Claire?"

Lassiter answered only with a mocking smile. And Brad quivered in every fiber as the man's sinewy hands deftly searched him for a nonexistent pistol—quivered with the lust to drive his fists hard home between those mocking gray-green eyes, to batter and to tear the truth from Lassiter.

Lassiter drew back and flung an arm out toward the jungle wall in a gesture of summons. Straightway the green growth parted in a dozen places, and into view stepped twelve of the strangest warriors Brad had ever seen.

Tall, they were, and deeply bronzed, and naked except for scarlet clouts of dyed buckskin. Here and there among them was a pair of slate-gray eyes, but in the main their features were dark

and slightly flattened—perhaps from the admixture of native jungle blood down through the ages.

Each man's left wrist was circled by a broad band of hammered copper, and each wore suspended by a narrow thong across his muscular chest a snake-skin quiver filled with scarlet-feathered shafts. And each man bore a weapon that was strangely kin to the ancient crossbow, with a feathered shaft ready in the groove and the rawhide string at notch.

These weapons, every one, were pointed straight at Brad, in a silence that was tinglingly ominous.

The whimpering of Huikima was in that silence a plaint of piteous terror. Lassiter strode to the boat, jerked an automatic from his armpit holster, and calmly shot the cowering native through the head.

BRAD was sickened at the cold-blooded viciousness of Lassiter. It seemed as if the man was embarked upon some abandoned course where regard for human life was furthest from his thoughts. From between set teeth Brad flung such an accusation at Lassiter, and with it a repeated demand to know the whereabouts of Claire.

Lassiter's lips curled—the sure smile of one who knows he has the upper hand. "I may as well tell you, Rockwell, since there is nothing you can do about it. But first you may be interested to know how I safely contacted these people of Little Atlantis—for they are just that."

Swiftly Lassiter drew from his pocket a book of paper matches, ignited one and from it lighted the others. The flaming mass he passed deliberately across his tongue, and deep within his mouth, and closed his lips thereon—and smiled.

Brad observed upon the faces of the alert Red Guards a collective look of wonder and of deference.

Nonchalantly Lassiter tossed away the expired matches. "Very simple, for one with a knowledge of chemistry," he said, chuckling. "A wash for the mouth—and equally effective on rubber bands!"

Suddenly his countenance changed; his gray-green eyes took on a fanatical gleam. "I told you, Rockwell, that *nothing* should prevent me from attaining my ends. I found this colony to be exactly as I suspected, and, thanks to you and Claire, I shall accomplish my full desires.

"You, my dear fellow, are destined to learn at firsthand the manner of Shorty's dying. Afterward I shall experiment with your body to find out if you have contributed anything of value to science.

"As for Claire, I once hoped—but that doesn't matter now. She is merely useful to me as a means of obtaining a demonstration of that mysterious power of levitation I told you about. Although my friends of Little Atlantis have accepted me as something of a superman, they have very definite ideas where their own god is concerned. They refuse to allow me to witness the rising of Neptune unless I furnish the proper sacrifice to propitiate a defiled god's anger. Nothing less than a young and beautiful girl of my own race, for the trampling feet of the six winged horses——"

"Damn you, Lassiter!" ripped out Brad, his lean face gone white with fury and revulsion.

Clear in his mind was the realization that Lassiter had seized upon Ross Honeyman's yearning for fresh meat as a means of getting Brad away downriver, clearing the path for Claire's abduction. Hard put, he was, to restrain himself from leaping here and now upon the man; but he did restrain himself, only because he hoped ultimately to effect Claire's rescue.

"Damn you, Lassiter! You *must* be mad—or an utter fiend!"

"I am neither," declared Lassiter calmly. "I am a scientist."

And with that, so swiftly that Brad barely glimpsed it coming and could by no means avoid it, Lassiter's sinewy fist drove out from his thickset shoulder and landed fairly on the point of Brad's jaw.

Without so much as the quiver of a nerve, Brad pitched forward into all enveloping blackness.

How long the numbing effects of that beautifully timed and executed blow endured, Brad had no way of calculating; for when his mind did at last struggle through to consciousness, he found himself beyond view of sun or outdoor daylight.

Yet a certain wan infiltration of daylight encompassed him; and he perceived that he was confined within four walls of stone, with an unseen ceiling lost in high dim shadows above his upturned face.

Realization flowed back upon him like the rush of a mountain torrent, drove him quickly to his feet. And he saw that he had been lying upon a couch of frail bamboo. No other furnishing was in the room. Nor was any door visible in the squarely joined stones of the walls. Light came grayly through a wide latticed window.

Brad hastened to this window, found its lattice to be of woven strips of thin tough copper, with two-inch interstices. Peering through, he stood for the moment lost in curious amazement.

The cubicle that imprisoned him was a portion of the circular wall of a great temple; the window where he was standing was a full dozen feet above the stone-flagged temple floor.

This temple wall was fashioned of irregular blocks of stone, veined between with gleaming copper. Its high and domelike roof was a webwork of thatched bamboo. Just beneath the

dome's highest point nestled an enormous ball of that same copper mesh which barred the window of Brad's prison.

From this great airy ball hung straight down a foot-wide ribbon of burnished copper, a shining ribbon that terminated, some twenty feet above the floor, in a second ball, a ball much smaller than the first and apparently of solid copper.

Squarely below this hanging ball, the center of the great bare temple floor was occupied by a gigantic stone figure of bearded Neptune—Neptune, riding a stone chariot crudely fashioned in the likeness of a sea shell, driving with one hand his plunging team of six winged stone horses and holding aloft in the other a mighty trident.

Brad saw that the prongs of the trident and its shaft were of solid copper, and that the upflung implement was, curiously, in fair line with the suspended copper ball above.

He noted, too, that the down-trampling forefeet of the two center horses were resting upon a great flat slab of stone with a metal tying ring at either corner—a slab that appeared not to be an integral part of the statue, but entirely separate.

And this slab was stained a darkly crimson hue—the hue of blood.

XII.

AS BRAD stood there at the latticed window, chill with the awful certainty that his eyes were beholding the sacrificial slab upon which Claire was doomed to die, he faintly heard behind him the muffled tread of feet.

He wheeled about, saw a portion of the opposite wall swing slowly inward. Through the doorlike aperture thus revealed strode three of the Red Guards. The first carried his powerful crossbow at ready. The second bore carefully a cup fashioned of hammered copper and

brimming with what looked to be a dark rich wine. The third was another bowman, watchful like the first.

While the first and third stood guard, the second approached Brad and gravely proffered him the cup. Brad took it, knowing nothing else to do. The bearer motioned him to drink. Brad half raised the cup, and his nostrils were assailed by that same unforgettable and faintly pungent odor that had been on the dead lips of Shorty.

Brad stiffened. He knew not what mysterious jungle drug might lurk within the drink; but he did keenly realize that its drinking would be the first step toward that doom which had sent Shorty stark and bloodless down the river trail. He stiffened, and he hesitated.

The eyes of the Red Guards were steadily upon him. His mind raced. And of a sudden his eyes widened and stared past the three guards at the empty doorway, as if he saw some fearful presence there. A timeworn trick, but it served him well. The heads of the startled Red Guards swung, and in that brief moment of their misdirected attention, Brad swiftly flung the contents of the cup across his shoulder. The liquid fell unnoticed in a shadowy corner of the cell.

When the quick eyes of the Red Guards returned from the empty doorway, they saw the cup of hammered copper at Brad's lips; and the muscles of his throat were working, as if the final swallow were sweet to him.

Gravely he held forth the empty cup. The bearer received it and stepped back. The three guards watched Brad with a keen and quickened interest.

Brad could only guess at the intended effect of the drug. Was it some lethal poison that must quickly strike its victim down? Or was it slow in its effect?

As Brad stood there wondering what his move should be, it seemed as if the wan light from the shadowy temple had

perceptibly diminished. Too, he was aware of a growing oppressiveness in the air he breathed—the oppressiveness which presages the approach of an unusually severe electrical storm. The faint far rumble of thunder caught his ear.

The Red Guards looked at one another with questioning uneasiness. At length one spoke to his companions; and Brad was astonished that the words had meaning for his own ear. The talk was nothing other than a mongrel Greek, and not too difficult of comprehension.

"The time grows short," this Red Guard had observed. "The storm god calls to Neptune."

"That is truth," agreed another.

And the third guard peered uneasily at Brad and said: "This brother of the fire eater is a strong man. The cup of sleep works all too slowly on him."

So that was it—cup of sleep! Brad had his cue and he acted swiftly upon it. His lids drooped and he began to sway upon his legs. Perhaps, he thought, the guards might see their work well done and leave the door ajar.

So he feigned the approach of an overpowering drowsiness and feigned it so well that the cup bearer leaped beside him, sustained him with a bare brown arm. One of the bowmen dropped his weapon and lent his aid. Brad's heart leaped with sudden hope—perhaps the end might not be here, and the Red Guard meant to carry him clear of the cell.

But this was not to be. They lifted him and placed him on the bamboo couch; and one of them began swiftly to remove his footgear. He lay relaxed and deeply breathing, simulating sleep yet grimly alert for desperate battle against overwhelming odds, should occasion arise.

However, the Red Guards did no more than bare his feet and lightly anoint the soles and toes with the dregs

of the copper cup. Then with quiet haste the three left the cell, the door closed, and he was alone in a gloom fast thickening under the approach of storm.

A LONG drumbeat of thunder rolled distantly. As its reverberations died away, Brad heard in the high dark shadows above the couch a sound like the sliding away of one stone from another. Faint whispering of unseen wings filled the upper void.

Swiftly down from those high shadows a huge black bat came plummeting. Another followed, and another, and yet more, until the cell was filled with the rush of wheeling wings, sinister wings, that all but brushed his face in their swift passings.

For the moment Brad lay rigid in the grip of horror and of loathing. It seemed as if the wheelings and dartings of those great black bats were the bold and impatient quest for prey, or for the source of some exciting and compelling scent. Brad dared not move, lest their attention be diverted to himself.

He saw the loathsome creatures suddenly mass and cluster in the corner where the liquid from the cup was spilled; and there upon the bare stone floor they squirmed and fought, with ratlike squeakings. For a long moment this nauseous spectacle endured; then, as quickly as its forming, the black mass disintegrated, and once more the questing rush of wings was in the air.

Swiftly upon Brad came the realization that his bare feet were anointed with that mysteriously compelling scent, and with that realization a sharp pain like the drive of small twin needles lanced the ball of one big toe, and at his feet he beheld three of those black bats hovering.

An inarticulate cry of horror choked in Brad's throat. He lunged erect, and with him was the fearsome knowledge

of just how Shorty had died here! Upon this very couch had Shorty lain, powerless in the grip of that strange cup of sleep, while those loathsome vampires of the jungle took his blood through tiny punctures missed by the eyes of Dr. Branch.

Around Brad they now clustered—around his feet, his head, his arms, with bloodthirsty and invincible persistence. With grim savagery he fought against their numbers, kicked at them with bare feet, beat with his fists at their hungry dartings, tore frenziedly at their revolving bodies clinging so tenaciously to him wherever chance afforded.

It seemed as if the growing dark was full of those winged furies. As fast as one was dislodged another took its place. In harried desperation Brad seized upon the bamboo couch, wrenched a portion of it free. With this weapon he swung and lashed and battled, until one by one the greater number of those grim black bats of death were felled, and the rest had fled away to the high shadows with frightened squeakings.

Bleeding from countless tiny wounds and scratches, fair sick with nausea, Brad stood on spread legs fighting for breath. And now he was aware that the jungle storm had risen to a high pitch. Almost he could feel the tingling presence of unseen lightning, and the cannonading of the thunder was terrific.

He swung toward the window, was amazed to see against the copper lattice a play of weird bluish light. He leaped that way and peered—and the spectacle that met his gaze put at naught the horror of all lesser things. His blood froze for the moment in his veins.

XIII.

IN SCORES of niches on the opposite wall of the temple burned yellow flaming torches. But these were feeble illumination against that strange bluish light that was everywhere, a glow that,

heightened at each flash of outward lightning, emanated weirdly from that great copper ball high under the crown of the temple's dome.

Thronged below the yellow torches were the dwellers of Little Atlantis, men and women, darkly bronzed and wearing no more than clouts and skirt-like tunics of indeterminable color. Silence lay upon them, and their watching faces were intent.

In front of the great stone figure of Neptune and his winged stone horses was a wide semicircle of Red Guards with crossbows presented in military precision. Within the semicircle of guards stood a bearded old man clad in a long scarlet vestment of authority. And with this man was Lassiter, standing on widespread legs, his thickset shoulders hunched forward with eagerness. Lassiter and his pitiless gray-green eyes were held in thrall by the evident fulfillment of his quest.

Directly in front of the great stone horses were four more of the Red Guards. Two of them were dragging—and with such apparent ease as to suggest the presence of hidden wheels or rollers—the ponderous sacrificial slab from beneath the heavy forefeet of the center horses.

The other two Red Guards were holding Claire between them.

Unclad she was, except for a brief tunic of pure white and small linked breastlets of hammered copper. Erect she stood, her great dark eyes staring with dread, fascination upon the crimson slab. Too horrified to move, she seemed; too horrified to know the merciful benediction of fainting.

Brad tried to shout a frenzied protest through the lattice, but the cry stuck in his dry throat. And now the sacrificial slab was clear, and the two guards lifted Claire and placed her, face upward, on its crimson top.

As if contact with the grim cold stone did break her horror, she writhed and

fought against the merciless grip of the powerful guards, who bound her to the slab. Above the torrential beating of rain on the thatched roof of the temple, above the frightful rolling of the thunder, rose clear her screams of terror.

Frenziedly, again and again, Brad lunged with all his weight against the barrier lattice, and mightily he tore at those thin ribbons of unyielding copper. Unyielding, they held, and they rebuffed him. His breath came gaspingly.

Out in the temple was born a sound most ominous—a sinister, hissing, crackling sound of mysterious but awful portent.

At the last ditch of desperation, Brad lunged back against the far wall of his cell. Then, head down and shoulder forward, he drove at the copper barrier with an abandoned fury not to be denied. Under his catapulting weight the bottom of the lattice tore away from anchorage, and swung outward. The momentum of his savage plunge carried him full across the ledge of the window and downward upon the temple floor.

Shaken from heels to head by that solid impact, Brad scrambled half dazed to his feet. And he beheld a wavering ribbon of blue flame crackling and hissing along the six-foot gap between the suspended solid ball of copper and the copper prongs of Neptune's upflung trident. And he was amazed to see that the gigantic stone figure in its entirety was rising with majestic slowness from the temple floor.

Appalled, he was, also, to see that the sacrificial slab with Claire bound upon its crimson top, had been rolled back into place below the rising feet of the great stone horses. Massive forefeet rising—and he could not guess the awful moment when the rise would cease and they must come plunging down to crush the life from Claire.

With a wild cry surging from his lips, Brad plunged straight on toward the group intent before the rising sea god.

The Red Guards heard, turned, and were amazed. The old man in red vestments swung and stared. So did Lassiter, and swiftly his eyes were flaming pools of fury. His tongue roared words in mongrel Greek:

"Stop him, Red Guards! Seize him—let your shafts strike him down!"

But the Red Guards hesitated, and one of them cried quickly to the old man:

"We dare not! For he is a greater man than the fire eater. Did I not with my own hands give him the cup of sleep and with my own eyes see him drink it?"

"Aye!" chimed in another. "Has he not prevailed against the cup of sleep and against the black birds of death?"

There was time for no more, for Brad in his wild charge was hard upon them. They gave way, made space, and Brad lunged on. His only thought was Claire, his one intent to reach and free her before those mighty hoofs of stone should come crashing down.

BUT Lassiter was in the way—the solid bulk of Lassiter, mad with fury and as dangerous as any cobra. Brad saw death riding wild in those gray-green eyes, saw Lassiter's automatic come leaping out in hand, gleaming ugly under the weird blue light. Twice the weapon spurted flame; but haste on the trigger spoiled Lassiter's murderous intent. Both bullets missed Brad by a scant inch, and a split breath later he was upon Lassiter like a grim tornado of savagery.

At that first crashing impact of stalwart bodies Lassiter's pistol went spinning. It was man to man, hand to hand, with every furious atom of Brad's strength bent upon removing Lassiter from his path to Claire.

But Lassiter was no less determined.

Bereft of gun, his arms encompassed Brad and his rocklike sinews heaved and strained to crack Brad's spinal column.

Back arched like unyielding steel against the tremendous strength of the malevolent scientist, breath whistling between set teeth, Brad drove short upward blows—left and right, right and left—smashing viciously against the chin of Lassiter. Those jolting blows told; Lassiter's grip slacked. Grimly Brad gave him the knee. Lassiter lurched back, his face contorted.

Brad plunged desperately for the sacrificial stone. Lassiter's foot snaked out, tripped him heavily. But he came up like a panther, and Lassiter was at him again with renewed fury. Lassiter's bronzed fists drove and hammered. Brad blocked and weaved, wary against the coming of such a blow as Lassiter had dealt him on the bank of the channel.

Trying a dozen times, and failing, Lassiter threw such tactics to the winds, bulled his way through Brad's countering blows and into another furious clinch. Savagely they battled.

The jungle storm was nearing its peak. Overhead the cannons of the thunder belched salvo after salvo, and the almost-continuous glimmer of the lightning through the temple's thatched roof was fearsome to behold. Spellbound, the dwellers of Little Atlantis watched the battle raging between the men. And so did Claire, with head sidewise turned and dark eyes staring from a countenance drained of all color.

Of a sudden Lassiter wrenched free, pivoted, and swiftly crashed home a fist that drove Brad to his knees. The temple spun. Dimly he saw Lassiter come leaping triumphantly to the kill, and beyond and above Lassiter he saw the great stone statue rising, rising, and the blue arc hissing between ball and trident was now no longer than a foot.

Sheer desperation drove Brad lurching up to meet Lassiter, and he brought with him from the tips of his bare toes a streaking fist. It caught Lassiter fair upon the chin, dulled the triumph in his eyes and set him rocking on his heels. Brad knew such a moment would not likely come again. He threw every tired ounce of his remaining vigor into a second blow that followed through upon the track of the first. Lassiter gave back, staggering. And a third blow toppled him; he went down crashing.

Brad swung staggering to Claire. His fingers tore frenziedly at the bonds holding her vital young body spread-eagled upon the sacrificial stone; but the knots were solid knots, and the now quickly shortening blue arc warned him that the great statue must be near the limit of its rising. Desperately he vaulted to the far side of the crimson slab, set his shoulder hard against it, and gave the utmost limit of his strength.

For a terrifying moment the ponderous slab refused to budge; then it gave an inch, and another; and then it freely moved. For the distance of its own full breadth it moved, and stopped. And at this moment the prongs of Neptune's trident made contact with the copper ball, and the arc was broken. And swift behind Brad's back the mighty statue dropped and landed with an impact that shook the temple floor.

But the great stone forefeet of the center horses were resting only on an empty space.

Again the long arc hissed and crackled, and the sea god began again his slow majestic rising.

Awe was upon the faces of the Red Guards and the bearded old man—awe, and deference, too. Brad tried his tongue in brief command. The Red Guards understood, and willing hands released Claire from her bonds.

Brad lifted her from the crimson

stone of sacrifice and carried her some yards beyond. Wordless, she clung tight to him, and with her safely in his arms he turned to look again upon the rising god. Turned to look at Neptune rising—but the thing that caught his startled eye was Lassiter—Lassiter upon his hands and knees, reaching for the pistol he had dropped. And now he had the weapon and was lunging to his feet with fury on his bruised and bloody countenance.

But Lassiter's weapon never spoke; instead, there came a sudden blinding flash all down the length of that great copper ribbon from the temple's dome, and with a terrific detonation that left nothing in the ear but ringing silence.

NO HUMAN eye could have withstood the blinding brilliance of that lightning flash. Brad's instinctively had closed. And when he opened them the weird blue light was gone and only the yellow torches lighted the temple.

But these were enough to reveal the havoc wrought by the lightning bolt. The great stone figure of Neptune had been split in two. And between the two halves lay a twisted, tangled mass of wheels and cylinders and gears of tempered copper.

The Red Guards, and the old man in his scarlet vestment, and the silent throng along the temple wall below the torches—all were gazing in horrified consternation upon the wreckage of their god.

And so was Lassiter. Heedless of the weapon in his hand, he stood staring at the revelation of wheels and gears and cylinders within the rent statue. And of a sudden, like one gone mad with eagerness and curiosity, he plunged between the fallen halves and began with vandal hands to tear at the mass of copper wreckage.

A sharp cry at this defilement broke from the lips of the bearded old man. Up went his trembling hands in a ges-

ture of command. And the Red Guards answered with throaty yells and cross-bows twanged.

The first of the scarlet-feathered shafts took Lassiter square in the middle of his broad back. Upright he lunged, roaring like a bull stung sorely by a hard-flung *banderilla*.

Claire smothered a cry of horror against Brad's shoulder. Brad swung and sped with her toward the temple's archlike entrance; and no hand stayed him, for every eye was upon Lassiter.

Brad's last backward glimpse, snatched as he plunged out to the free sweetness of the drenching rain, was of the bronzed scientist slowly crumpling like some monstrous scarlet jungle bloom whose sap of life is fast draining. Lassiter, full of the avenging shafts of the Red Guards, crumpled down amid the ruins of the secret he had tried to purchase with the life of Claire; the secret of the great stone statue's animation by means of some mysterious harnessing of the lightning's collected energy.

THE WAY ahead of Brad was sharply sloping. He took it with all speed, and at the foot he found his own small boat moored at the edge of a wide canal. The craft was quarter full with rain, but Brad lingered not to bail it out; in haste he placed Claire aboard

and shoved away. The valiant little motor responded to his first attempt at starting.

On through the drenching rain and the fast-receding clamor of the storm, away from the inner island of two temples, under high bridges of bamboo and past the nine rings of land, Brad drove the boat at full throttle. Then came the windings of the jungle channel, and at last the boat slid clear in the broader reaches of the river.

The storm was drawing fast away in the far distance and with it the rain. And with the coming of the clean bright sun Claire's eyes began to lose their deep shadows of the horror passed.

Brad took time to beach the boat on a jutting sand bar and bail out its accumulation of rain water. He took time, before he again started the motor, to reveal to Claire the deception Lassiter had practiced on her father.

Claire shuddered. "I don't want ever to think of him again," she declared. She snuggled close against Brad's knee and placed her hand with trust and thanks in his and said no more.

Nor did she need say more. To Brad this jungle river had suddenly become a sunlit pathway leading not alone to the big ship that would bear them swiftly homeward, but a pathway leading to a greater happiness than he had ever dreamed could be.

NEXT MONTH

*Blood and the treasure of princes and high peril in the
land of Genghis Khan!*

SWORDS OF SHAHRAZAR

by ROBERT E. HOWARD

in the

OCTOBER TOP-NOTCH



*In the center, in a special rack, was
Captain Davis' head.*

The Captain's Head

by Edmund Du Perrier

Illustrated by Paul Orban

WITH a slow monotonous beat, the shallow-draft river boat chugged up the brown murky waters of the Sepik River. The night heat was sweltering—stinking—oppressive—constant; the never-failing heat of the interior of New Guinea.

The roar of a bull crocodile, disturbed by the underwater beat of the motor, cut through the night. One of the two men in the little cabin shivered.

"I never did like those bleedin' things," he grumbled.

"Gettin' on your nerves already, George?" the other asked.

"No—but I tells you I don't like it—not 'arf!"

"And at this late hour, George, what are your particular objections?"

The first speaker glanced up uneasily. For a moment he did not speak, just sat looking at his companion, his

fat hands doubled around his gin glass.

Though the moral status of these two men was undoubtedly on an equally low plane, they were exact opposites in appearance.

George Stickney, the man who had expressed his dislike of crocodiles, was almost repulsively fat. His soiled whites were dripping with sweat, and sweat coursed down a fat red face which had not felt a razor for days. Little piggish eyes, always bloodshot from constant drinking, peered suspiciously at the other man. A hand-rolled cigarette drooped from the corners of his flabby lips and bobbed up and down as he spoke.

Steve Ballard might have stepped from a bandbox. Despite the heat, his whites were pressed, immaculate. His lean brown cheeks were freshly shaven, and white, pearly teeth clamped down on the end of a light-brown cigar. His graying hair was neatly divided, and the long slim hand hanging languidly over the back of the chair was clean and neatly manicured.

Only this man's eyes, hard as onyx, cruel in their hazel depths, were a betrayal of his character.

"What I means," George Stickney blurted out suddenly, "is that the more I thinks on it, the less right it seems." He gulped his gin. "An' me puttin' up the money, too."

"Well, you'd better get it out of your system now," Ballard said crisply. "In about two hours we're going to be at the police station at Ambunti. There might be trouble."

"That's the first bleedin' thing. Buckin' a district commissioner—shootin' maybe—it ain't sense. It——"

"You thought so below."

"Yes. I want a good bit of the stuff—and then it's out of the tropics for me. He's the blinkin' government—the British Empire—and that's goin' pretty far."

"Oh, I don't think we'll have any trouble. Besides, what if we do? This is worth it. There's twenty thousand pounds in it, anyway—that's the least. And I'd go through more than one commissioner for that."

The onyx eyes glittered with a cold light, and the fat man squirmed uneasily in his chair. He fortified himself with another glass of gin from the bottle on the table.

"But while it sounded good at the time, thinkin' it over it has a bit of a smell about it. How come Nevers ever gave you anything? He was no friend of yours."

"That's the most peculiar part of it—he wasn't. He was my bitterest enemy—at least one of them."

The piggish eyes filled with suspicion. "And then he ups and has a change of 'eart and gives you the blinkin' lay of the land like you was brothers, I suppose," the other sneered. "He wouldn't part with the captain's amulet wiv no one else."

"I told you Nevers gave me the location before he died. I didn't tell you how. But if it would ease that thick head of yours, I'll tell you."

SIX YEARS before, Captain Davis, an honest, hard-working pearler, had found a fine bed of pearls in that vast, unexplored waste on the north coast of New Guinea. Before he had time to dive, the monsoons had arrived.

Running before them, he had entered the mouth of the Sepik River. Being a methodical man, and no idler, Captain Davis had done two things: He had carved the latitude and longitude of that fine bed on a square piece of ivory and hung it around his neck as an amulet.

Then he had gone on a gold-hunting trip up the headwaters of the Sepik in the Victor Emmanuel Range. Unfortunately, he had been cut off by head-hunters and his head taken.

His mate, Nevers, had, by some quirk of the native mind, been held. Nevers was cross-eyed, and the natives might have held back because of some superstitious dread.

Months passed, with Nevers a captive, and the medicine man smoking the captain's head. As the captain sported a white beard, and was a white man as well, it was a magnificent trophy.

They had placed the head in the skull rack in the *dubu*, the men's huge community dwelling, and home of all their ritual. And still hanging around the false wooden neck was the amulet which bore the key to that marvelous pearl bed.

"Nevers escaped," Ballard concluded his story. "But he had no time to get down to the *dubu* house and grab that bit of ivory. He got down to Samarai, nearly dead with fever.

"While in the hospital he continually repeated my name. You see, I'd had a run-in with his bosom pal years ago, chap by the name of Wilson—and Wilson lost."

"In a fair scrap, I suppose," leered Stickney.

The onyx eyes narrowed for a moment, and then Ballard went on: "Well, I went to the hospital. There Nevers got into a worse delirium. He cursed me at first—called me everything. Then he got the bright idea that I was Wilson—although Wilson had been dead for years. Association of ideas—Wilson and I, I suppose.

"At any rate, he told me all about this. I got it in snatches. I knew Davis. He wouldn't go to the trouble unless it was worth a great deal. He'd seen too many pearl beds. Nevers said it was rich—a pearl in the few they'd brought up.

"And Davis was a soft man. He wouldn't touch the cannibals. Try to win them over with love." His slim hands clutched. His lips grew firm.

"But not us. We have guns and plenty of ammunition. We'll blast hell out of the natives, get our amulet, and anything else that appeals to us—and get out. Now, how do you feel about the whole business?"

"There'll be ruddy hell popping if we get caught shootin' natives," Stickney grunted, his fat face all ashine. "I ain't hankerin' to spend no time in any of these tropic jails. I've been in 'em before."

"An' so have I," Ballard said. "Buck up! Get your nerve! How would you like it said that George Stickney didn't have the guts to carry out anything he started?"

The fat man sighed. "I——"

A hail from the kinkyhead on the forepeak interrupted him. Both men leaped to their feet and rushed on deck.

"Ambunti!" Ballard said.

BARKING an order to the native at the engine, Ballard's hard eyes sought the shore.

There were lights in two bungalows, and the light of a flashlamp, which illuminated a rickety dock. The farthest inland post of the New Guinea administration was well lighted for the late hour.

"Hey, aboard there!" came a crisp voice from the shore. "You can dock here. Come ashore."

"We're in a hurry," Ballard called back. "Sorry!"

"That was an order, gentlemen. Messrs. Stickney and Ballard, I believe?" came the snappy command.

"Sorry, you've got the wrong party," Ballard called back. "See you some other time." He shouted to the engine man to increase the throttle.

The boat surged ahead swiftly. There was the roar of an outboard motor behind them.

"I guess we'd better stop," Ballard said. "These motors won't run away from an outboard." He ordered the

motors cut to slow speed and waited until the small craft ran up alongside.

A slim young man, in clean khaki, stepped aboard. His hands were empty though there was a buttoned holster on his hip. His eyes were slightly angry.

"Gentlemen," he said with authoritative politeness; "my orders are to stop you. You are to be held and sent down river under escort as soon as my assistants return."

"What's the idea?" snapped Ballard.

"New Guinea will be better off without you gentlemen. I think we know your purpose here—and it is not liked."

"We're going on," snapped Ballard. "Do you think you're going stop us?"

"Remember, sir," said the young man coolly, "my orders are backed by the British Empire."

"Bunk!" snarled Stickney. Now that he was cornered, some of his depraved courage had returned to him.

"Then I shall have to place you under arrest," the young officer said. Then his eyes smiled. "Besides——"

"Besides what?"

"You're in a sell. Our reports——"

The young man never had a chance to finish his sentence. From the holster beneath his shoulder, with a snarl of rage which drew his face into a vicious mask, Steve Ballard drew an automatic and shot—once!

A dark stain blotted the officer's whites just over his heart. "Nevers—a sell," he said as he plunged forward.

Ballard shouted for the motors. The boat surged ahead again.

"Now you've done it," whimpered Stickney. "Plain murder—and a police officer, too. We'll 'ang!'"

"Shut up!" snarled Ballard. "You whimpering cockney! That was the only way. Didn't he say his assistants were gone? He was the only man at the post. What will the native constables know about it? A boat in the dark. Where's the evidence? We'll

give this smart officer to the crocodiles. And who'll be the wiser? Use that thick head of yours, if you can. It was the only way."

He was under a visible strain. His words cracked like a whip. Stickney stumbled into the cabin and poured himself a stiff hooker of gin. He downed it in one gulp.

On deck, after the boat had proceeded a mile or two, Ballard lifted the dead officer and heaved him over-side. Another roar from a disturbed bull crocodile shattered the silence of the steaming night.

He smiled grimly. The smell of that blood would be sufficient. "And they'll never be the wiser," Ballard whispered to himself.

Once he frowned. How had Nev-ers' name come upon the officer's lips? And what had he meant by a sell? He shrugged his neatly clad shoulders and returned to the cabin, where Stickney huddled over the gin bottle.

Then Ballard did something that was against his general routine of living. He took a glass from the cabin rack and poured himself a strong portion of gin.

DAY after day the shallow-draft, full-powered boat pounded up the Sepik. They passed through the mountain range near Ambunti and then entered the long stretch over the swamp plains toward the mountain range. At the foothills of the Central Range, always visible, was the native village he sought.

There was a tense atmosphere on board as they went on. Across the plain the river twisted and coiled. The boat went miles in twisting curves to get one mile ahead.

Stickney resorted more and more to the gin bottle. His face, unshaven still, grew more red and bloated. The stigma of fear was written plainly upon him.

Stickney was no angel. He had

more than once contracted a debt which only hanging could pay. But he had never seen a more cold-blooded murder than that committed by Ballard. The sight of that crept into his yellow soul. Bumping off one of his own breed was different—but the police——

For the police never relented.

"An' these 'ere kinky'eads," he complained once, "if they get 'em talkin' wot'll 'appen?"

Ballard grinned maliciously. "They won't talk. We'll take care of that. A little job for you, my dear Stickney."

The leader, for only his will kept Stickney under control now, never once lost his poise. That one drink of gin, after the murder, had been his single lapse. He still remained immaculate, despite the heat of that sticky swamp.

Once he attempted to ease Stickney's fears: "If we make out all right, we can slip over the Dutch frontier and take a canoe down the Mambaramo. It heads up here in the range, too."

The river grew swifter; progress slower. They were starting to cut into the foothills now.

They passed native villages occasionally. Generally the natives scurried out of sight, but more than once they brandished spears and arrows.

Black, ugly, bestial, the farther the white men penetrated, the less in the way of decoration these savages wore. Often they saw the famous *dubu* houses, the front entrance rising sixty feet above the ground, the thatched roofs running back to a lower end, sometimes four hundred feet away.

These savages of the upper Sepik were warriors. A man might land and get away with it. Yet an attempt to violate the *dubu* house, temple of their superstitions, their tribal rites, home of their spears, devil masks, shields, and, most of all, their stuffed heads, symbols of their pride, would end only in violence.

And Ballard was going to precipitate that violence. No long harangue—no kind methods. A withering fire to put the fear into them—and then the amulet.

Greed, desire, drove with a relentless purpose beneath that calm exterior. Stickney recognized it, and he grew more fearful.

Gin, heat, and fear had made of him a flabby wreck.

"Buck up!" snapped Ballard after the sixth day. "We'll be there in the morning if we keep up this speed."

ONCE that afternoon they fought off an attack. It told them that the temper of the savages was plain. That white head in Dulik village had aroused a thirst for similar heads in other tribes.

It had the effect of sobering Stickney somewhat. And at noon the next day, when they approached the village, he was ready on deck with his rifle, and his .45 in the holster at his side.

The grapevine telegraph of the jungle had preceded them. As they slowly bucked against the now boiling current they could see the savages assembling.

Back from the river, between two sheltering palms, was the *dubu* house. It stood on a slightly elevated bank. In a marshy spot close to the river, the natives, brandishing spears, and covered partially by their decorated shields, put up a continual wail of battle.

The slim, calm man examined his rifle and loosened the cartridges in the belt around his waist.

As they came abreast of the group on shore he snapped: "Give it to them!"

As the natives poised to throw spears and send a shower of arrows, that leaden hail swept them. In rapid succession they unloaded their magazines.

Fear and consternation broke in the ranks of the cannibal head-hunters. Their sacred shields were of no avail

against this strange warfare.

Every bullet had accounted for a man.

The natives broke and ran. Again they assembled, in front of the *dubu* house. Their ineffectual weapons would not carry to the boat, now turning inshore.

They imagined themselves out of range. But Ballard and Stickney had reloaded. They sent another withering fire into the panic-stricken warriors.

The boat beached in the mud of the shore.

Ballard laughed gently—a laugh of triumph. “That’s the way to deal with them,” he said. “Lay them out like sheep.”

Stickney did not answer. He did not possess that iron streak. The slaughter, in his half-drunk condition, sickened him.

Yet he followed, though in his eyes there was still fear. Ballard had said that there would be no witness left for his murder. How far was that diabolical scheme going to go?

They crossed the swampy ground, climbed the little knoll, and stood in front of the *dubu* house.

“They’ve gone,” Ballard said. “But they might be hiding in the *dubu* house. Let’s get up and give them another dose.”

In the lowlands the *dubu* houses were mostly raised on stilts. But in the mountain foothills the entrance was level with the dry ground.

Only silence and hideously carved masks met them in the *dubu* house. The dim interior seemed to inclose no warriors. Nevertheless, they fired a round through the center of the building. Two dark shapes tried to worm through the thatch. With a grim laugh in his throat Ballard cut them down.

THE LONG *dubu* was divided into many compartments. Skull racks were on one side of each warrior’s abode—

below stood the *gopes*, sacred shields. Unviolated, these held the spirits of the departed from wandering—and from bringing a curse on their slayer.

The whole place reeked of savage superstition, dreadful and mysterious. Although a shivering fear shook Stickney, and his piggish eyes gleamed, Ballard smoked his brown cigar placidly.

He sought the skull racks, some of them containing as many as thirty of these gruesome objects.

“Keep your eyes open while I search,” he commanded.

Stickney became swivel-necked. His eyes furtively sought the farther end, shadowed, potent with the hidden dangers of that grim savage house.

Ballard ruthlessly ripped *gopes* and masks from their moorings. A wail came from a hundred throats. Ballard lifted his rifle.

Then the front entrance was filled once more with furious head-hunters.

Treacherously barbed spears flashed through the air.

Both white men responded with a burst of gunfire—the entrance was cleared except for the dead. There rose a terrific wailing outside. The whimpering of frightened, nonunderstanding savages.

Ballard went on, leaving destruction in his wake as he searched for that head. He penetrated the interior of the gigantic thatched dwelling farther. Once a shower of arrows, badly aimed, came through the thatching.

They fired back. Cries of pain arose.

A vague suspicion entered Ballard’s head. Had he been duped? He tore down more of the ritual trophies. Still no white head.

Stickney was almost whimpering. His shaken nerves could hardly stand against the nameless, fearful dread with which this unwholesome place filled him.

“Hey—they’re back!” he yelled.

Once more the savages had resolved

upon making a brave stand against the vandals desecrating their sacred traditions.

Grimly the two white men sent punishing lead into their ranks.

This time there was no return. Naked savages, with their pitiful weapons, could not fight that bitter gunfire.

The chanting of defeat came from the remaining savages. Their ranks had been cut to pieces. And from the tempo of their wailing Ballard knew that they had given up.

Then he saw the head. He came upon the largest compartment in the *dubu*.

It was undoubtedly the chief's. It was roofed—and contained the greatest number of skulls, *gopes*, masks, and bird-of-paradise headdresses.

In the center of the skull rack, in a special niche, was Captain Davis' head. The beard, its snowiness somewhat browned with smoke and grime, had been preserved, and on the wooden neck which replaced the original hung a white square.

"That's it—the amulet!" Ballard shouted triumphantly. The undertone of his cry was almost maniacal.

Stickney straightened. "We're rich—rich!" he blubbered.

"Yes, rich!" Ballard cried. "I'm rich now."

BALLARD was inside the compartment, reaching for the white square.

"We'll be all right now—we're——"

Ballard wheeled. There was an insane light in his eyes. "Not you, Stickney—me. This is mine. There's no sharing this."

Stickney gaped. His red face flushed deeper with sudden knowledge and anger. He had been duped. Ballard had never any intention of sharing. He had used his money only to outfit them—to help him fight the head-hunters.

He swung his rifle—too late.

Ballard laughed. His rifle had already been covering the flabby cockney. It roared. With an open-mouthed, foolish, incredulous look, Stickney sank to the floor of the *dubu*.

"That's that," Ballard grunted. "He was of some use up to now. From here out that yellow, drunken sot would have been a nuisance." His laughter rang through the savage house.

He looked at the amulet he had jerked from the captain's neck. He glowered. It was simply a small ivory cigarette case.

He flipped it open and saw the paper inside. It was a message—not an amulet.

He read:

BALLARD: If you get this you'll know I sent you here. I haven't forgotten Wilson. And those who touch the captain's head find death—soon, very soon.
NEVERS.

Ballard shivered—his onyx eyes contained a flash of fear. An ominous prevision of death sent a tremor through him.

Nevers' delirium had been a sham; he had neatly trapped him.

Then his eyes hardened. They would never get him. He had cleared his path—he jumped out of the chief's compartment, turned toward the empty entrance.

A hideous savage scream above him made him glance upward. He stood fascinated with horror.

Hurling through the air toward him was a many-barbed, vicious spear—it caught him squarely in the throat.

And before he went to his throttling, gasping death he had a moment of clear vision.

The police officer had said: "Nevers—a sell!" He had known.

Chanting, savage, exultant, filled his ears. He knew that he had been the object of a bitter jest. And then he knew no more.

Vacation in Karachi

by
Jacland
Marmur
*Illustrated by
J. Maturo*

STEPHEN TRASK, first assistant engineer of the *SS Tamilar*, paused on the topmost grating and looked down into his engine room. The black-bellied cylinders shuddered. Polished rods glittered and vanished, glittered and vanished, moving with slow and powerful certainty. Auxiliaries shuttled like invisible rabbits scuttling in fright through a forest of flashing iron and steel.

A light, glimmering under a green shade, swayed gently over the log desk far beneath him. The *Tamilar*, fresh from the bone yard of laid-up ships, riding high and cargo free, was outward bound from 'Frisco to load general freights in San Pedro for Oriental ports.

Trask was weary. Sailing day on an ocean tramp is a mad time for engineers. His corn-colored hair objected in unruly clumps to the restraint of his boiler cap. His patrol jacket seemed too small for his shoulders. But there was a steadiness in his blue eyes, something he had not known for a long time. A man with a three months' suspension scrawled in red ink across the back of his ticket was more than lucky to have a ship at all these days, much less a first assistant's berth.

Sunlight splashed the skylight above his head. The swinging shadows of harbor gulls darted across it; their screaming filled the morning. Trask smelled again the dank smell of the bay; the familiar odors of polished metal,

of engine oil, and half-burned gases were in his nostrils again. Under his feet the ship, shouldering her way past Fort Point, heaved to the first long roller of the wine-dark Pacific and lurched heavily.

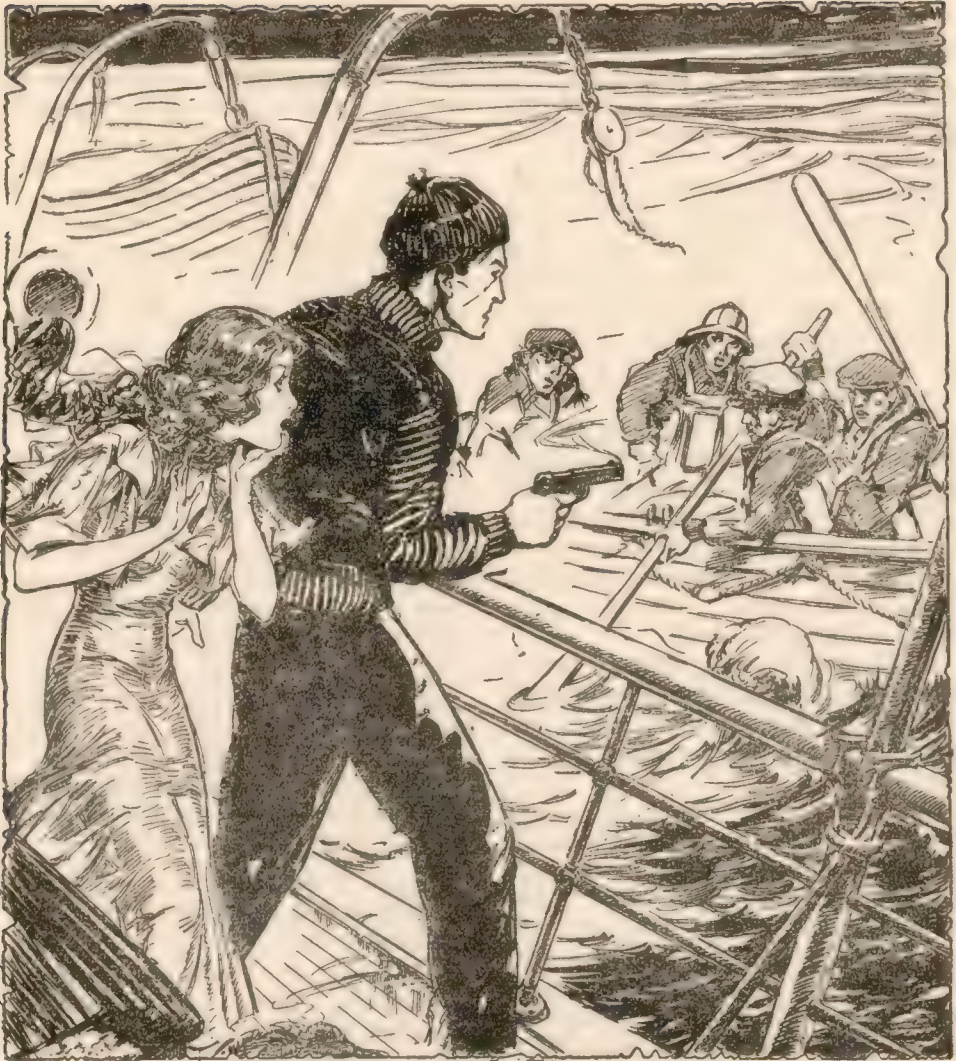
The blare of Mile Rock brayed a warning of fog beyond the headlands. Wet and heavy, with the treacherous weather of March behind it, it rolled toward the coast in dark smoky walls. Stephen Trask felt the first gust of it pass in a cold blast over the ship. He grinned. He was at home again. Turning into the alleyway, he forgot for the moment that he sailed under Captain Garrett again, and that Gil Blistoe was now his chief.

In his room, he closed the heavy teakwood door behind him carefully. He wanted the sense of privacy, security, the acrid and unmistakable odor that hangs in ship's cabins. The *Tamilar* stumbled in her pace now, feeling the strength of the open sea at her bows. She set to rolling in long deliberate arcs. Her whistle started blaring into the fog.

Stephen Trask grinned again and stepped toward the washbasin. Something creaked behind his back. He took no notice. But a moment later a soft contralto voice said:

"Please! I've got to come out of here."

THE FIRST ASSISTANT spun on his heel. A girl, edging sideways out of his narrow clothes locker, stood swaying



The small boat drifted closer, and Trask's automatic barked.

on the floor with her back against the bulkhead and one little fist grasping the handle of the locker door to steady herself. Trask remained with his mouth agape and one large hand on the towel rack. He knew that her hair was a mass of rich unruly auburn and that her troubling eyes were just a little bit frightened; he knew mostly that her slim and shapely loveliness did not belong in an engineer's room at sea. He simply stared.

"You—you're terribly angry?" she asked tremulously. Her eyes were amazingly large and bright.

"Good Heaven! What are you doing here?"

"Office economy. I'm on a three months' vacation, beginning to-day—without pay. But I'm poor," she went on with a hint of merriment, "and I can't afford any vacation. So I—well, I walked aboard before sailing. And—here I am."

"You mean you stowed away in my room deliberately?"

"It certainly wasn't an accident."

"It won't do." Trask was savagely firm. "I'll have to report you to the old man."

He took a step toward the door. The girl uttered a low gasp, swayed, and touched his arm. The whistle brayed over their heads. The *Tamilar* rolled as if she meant to bury her rails, brawling down the south channel in a blustering wind thick with dripping fog.

"Please!" She was eager, intense. Stephen Trask could not help looking into her pleading eyes. "I'll be quiet as a mouse. See? I've even brought sandwiches for lunch. They'll do me until San Pedro. I'll not be very hungry. You'll be there to-morrow, and no one will ever know. You can't know what this means to me!"

She gestured vaguely with a fluttering hand. He knew she meant the dip and rise and stumble of a ship in a land swell, the noise of the wind and the sea.

"I want to see Saigon, Surabaya, Karachi. If you turn me in now I'll never get aboard again. If you don't, once we're clear of San Pedro, I won't be any trouble to you. Honestly! I'll go up to your captain myself. He won't waste steam and the owner's money just to put me back to port." Her voice trailed off feebly. "Have a heart!"

Trask's hand fell from the knob of his cabin door. Without a word, he turned and dropped the deadlight over the porthole. Then he faced her again, seriously. But his voice was not very steady.

"Miss Madsen——"

"Oh, then you do remember me?" she murmured wistfully. "I thought that——"

"Nora, you——"

Perhaps it was the quick light that came into her eyes that stopped him. Know her? Aye! He wasn't likely to

forget Nora Madsen. She wasn't the sort of girl you forgot, even though she was private secretary to the inspector of hulls and boilers in the customs building in 'Frisco.

It was in those rooms up there that Nora had taken stenographic notes of the evidence at the official inquiry after the *Altair* blew up and sank off Tatoosh Light. Captain Garrett and Gil Blistoe said Trask was drunk in charge of the watch. She'd heard it all and written it down for the record. Drunk? He winced. They had to save their own desperate skins.

He was fortunate, the inspectors told him, not to have his license revoked entirely. But he'd managed to crawl through an agony of live steam to shut off the main valve. He'd saved a good many men from roasting to death. The scars of it—and the inquiry—were on him.

They let him off mercifully with a three months' suspension. Drunk? A drunken hero! He remembered clearly Nora's hand on his arm when they were done with him and her tender smile of sympathy as she said:

"Steve, I don't believe a word of it. We'll have dinner together to-night just the same?"

They had not. Trask could not face it that easily. There were things wanted straightening out inside himself. And there she was facing him and smiling a little. He came back to the present with a start.

"Captain Garrett is skipper of the *Tamilar*. Blistoe is my chief, Nora." He grinned ruefully. "There's no one else on the water front will take a chance giving a red-ticketed man a——"

"Oh!" Her hand flew to her breast. "I'll not have you in trouble again. It's sporting of you, Steve, but——"

A heavy tread sounded on the iron deck of the alleyway outside. Knuckles banged on the door. Trask looked

swiftly at the girl and jerked his thumb toward the locker.

"In there with you!" he whispered fiercely.

Trask called a hasty: "Come in; come in!"

THE DOOR swung, crashing open with a heavy roll of the ship. Gil Blistoe; the chief engineer of the *Tamilar*, stood lolling against the jamb. A short fleshy man, his girth almost blocked the gloomy passageway. His head was completely bald, but gray wiry hair bushed shaggily over moist and colorless eyes. One beefy hand caressed his paunch as he grinned amiably at his first assistant.

"Thought I'd look in," he remarked pointedly. "Want to tell you I'm glad your ticket's in the rack again."

"Thanks!"

Blistoe's brows beetled. He expected something more by way of gratitude than a grunted word.

"In case you'd like to know, Trask," he bit off flatly, "Captain Garrett and I had a time convincing the owners to take you on again after the *Altair* business. At that, the underwriters are just as like as not to jerk you off the ship in Pedro before we sail for the Orient. The beach is lousy with engineers hunting ships. A man with a cracked ticket is not——"

"That what you came to tell me, chief?"

Something happened in Trask's steady eyes. Flecks of anger glittered in their depths.

Gil Blistoe laughed uneasily. "Don't be a fool, Trask! You're only a kid to be holding down a first assistant's job these days. There's lots of things you don't understand. But you'll learn. Aye; you'll learn. What the hell's a three months' suspension to a youngster like you? You'll get over it. Garrett and I, we're trying to do the right thing for you in squaring——"

"That'll be enough, Blistoe!" Trask

cut in with dangerous calm. "I got my bellyful of lectures at the *Altair* inquiry. You're my chief." His voice cracked like a lash. "If you've any orders, give 'em. I've got work to do."

"You young fool! There isn't a ship-owner on the coast would give you an oiler's job! I go to bat for you and then——"

"Clear out!"

Blistoe looked at him. His lips curled. Then he slammed the door with a bang and clumped away.

Stephen Trask remained standing with his eyes staring at the wet teak-wood and the tarnished brass knob. Perhaps it was silly for a man to be so insistent on his own professional integrity. Trask couldn't help it.

Ships and engines were in his blood. The synchronized noise of machinery was music to him, from the double-bass of the crank throws, the friendly quarreling of the eccentrics, the sob and heave of the feed pumps to the rhythmic purr of the dynamics; perfect timing, perfect discipline, perfect power. Something for a man to understand!

And he'd wanted a clean ticket, as clean as a boar's tooth. He winced. There were things in his mind, grotesque things. Gil Blistoe with his bloated vein-ribbed face, and a cadaverous hollow-eyed skipper solemnly facing an inquiring board, and Nora Madsen taking notes with her lips trembling and her head averted so as not to look at Steve's drawn face.

"He's a beast!"

Trask turned slowly and saw her standing in his cabin, her eyes full of anger and indignation. He had almost forgotten her presence aboard the *Tamilar*.

"I'll tell the mess boy not to bother with my room, Nora. Lock the door after me."

"Steve, I'm scared. Those two on board. You'll get in trouble again if

— I think I'd better find Captain Garrett and face the music."

"Might's well stick it out now." He grinned. "Happy vacation, Nora!"

She locked the door behind him and dropped weakly to the settee. She felt repentant. The mewling of the wind was everywhere, the muttering sea, and the sudden throat-catching snore of the whistle in the fog. But Steve hadn't let her down. He wouldn't! Her eyes lighted up.

JUST as seven bells were made for the mid-watch, Trask came abruptly from a deep sleep to wide consciousness. He had stretched out on the settee for a few hours' sleep, leaving Nora curled in his bunk against the opposite bulk-head. He was aware now that she was not there. It startled him, until he heard her humming very softly to herself. He moved his head a little and saw her. In the dim light she was kicking off what looked like one of his own grimy boiler suits.

"Hello!" he muttered. "What've you been up to?"

"Morning, Steve! I couldn't sleep. I've been exploring." She laughed a subdued and excited little laugh. "If any one saw me with that huge suit of your overalls on over my clothes, they certainly took me for one of your bruising firemen."

"Exploring?" Trask reached for his pipe and stood up. "Hungry?"

She shook her head. "Too excited. A ship at night, especially running in fog, is the most ominous-smelling thing on earth! Full of rocking shadows and terrible sounds. And your engine room! Ugh!"

"Engine room! You been down——"

"There wasn't any one in sight. I stole down. The men must have been in a little cave. I heard them working there. Sounded as if they were tempering metal or welding——"

"Tempering metal!"

"Well, you needn't laugh! How should I know what they were doing? I heard a torch going and Blistoe's voice. Then a hissing like cold water pouring on hot metal. Brr! I was scared and ran back up here. Why, what's the matter, Steve? No one saw me."

"Nothing, Nora. But I wouldn't do any more exploring. I'd better get along into the alleyways. Keep the oiler from bursting in here to call me for my watch."

He went out abruptly and stood in the gloomy passageway. The oiler came by, rousing the morning watch. He cocked a sleepy eye at Trask.

"One bell, First," he growled, and went shuffling along toward the fore-castle to call the black gang.

Trask went out on deck.

At the rail he puffed his pipe, staring at the blind curtain of fog. The *Tamilar* was going dead slow, clanging like a smithy shop as she rolled. Southeast weather, raw and thick, whined out of the Santa Barbara channel, piling the fog banks against the coast and the ship, swinging in the land swell.

Trask and his pipe seemed marooned on a narrow section of a disembodied ship, as if the rest of her had somehow got lost and gone drifting off in the void, leaving nothing visible but his dark shape beside half a winch drum, black and menacing, and the dripping plate of an iron bulwark. Surf thundered in the distance. Trask thought it dangerously close. The echo of the *Tamilar's* whistle beat back in his ears.

"Bah!" the first assistant growled. "Jumpy as a cat. Why in blazes did she have to pick the *Tamilar* for her damned vacation!" Then his face twisted in a remarkable grin as he thought of Nora pulling off a boiler suit four sizes too large for her slim graceful body. "Imagine the nerve of her crawling down to the engine room on her own! Plucky kid! What in thunder was Blis-

toe doing in the shaft alley? Tempering metal!"

He grunted, turned into the alleyway, and descended the network of grease-bound ladders to the engine room. The Second stood at the log desk, his jaws working on a tobacco cud as he made his entries, eager for relief. Eight bells tinkled through the skylight, open on a blur of yellow fog. The clang of the long bar in the engine room answered quickly.

"Chief been around?" Trask asked carelessly.

The Second shot him a swift look without turning his head. "Ugh!" he grunted; then quickly: "She goes on a stand-by bell. Thick as mud. G'night!"

He dived for the ladder and caught at the handrail against a sudden heave of the floor plates under his feet. Mr. Trask had officially taken over. The watch was his.

HIS EYES checked the glistening gauges instinctively, the telegraph face, the blackboard for chalked night orders. Then he made his round. Oiler weaving through the wilderness of iron and steel, oil can in hand, sweat rag about his throat. Fireroom gang all handy. He came back. The shaft-alley door was sinfully open.

"Careless pups!"

He looked in. Seemed in order. He closed it with an oath and flipped a screw bolt in place. The bridge telegraph jangled abruptly. Trask raced for the throttle, his eye first on the signal, then on the clock. Twelve minutes after four; they called for full ahead.

Night clearing? Fog. Rotten. Ship just out of the bone yard. Been laid up for Heaven knows how long. No freights, times what they were. The bone yard? *He* was just out of the bone yard, too! Funny thing to be thinking about, with the bridge calling for full ahead. Give it to 'em!

The crank throws picked up speed.

The rods flashed faster. The glittering black cylinders shuddered more fiercely. The whole ship trembled, fighting for speed. Full ahead! Steam still hissing from that L. P. gland. Would want repacking in Pedro. Long way to Karachi—

And then all hell broke loose in the *Tamilar's* engine room.

A savage metallic groan drowned the familiar sound of working machines. Trask spun aft, tense, alert. The oiler appeared from nowhere, his startled white face soiled with grease.

Then a single clap of thunder rocked the *Tamilar's* stern. The floor plates shuddered and buckled and danced. Rending metal shrieked. The main engine suddenly went mad. The cranks threw around in frenzy. She raced and trembled and flung her rods as if she meant to shake herself to pieces at once.

"She's struck!" the oiler screamed.

Trask dived for the throttle. She had to be stopped. She'd rip herself apart. No; she hadn't struck anything. He knew that. Thrown her wheel loose, he thought. Fifteen minutes after he'd taken over the watch! His face was grim.

"Give 'em stop on the telegraph!" he shouted above the roar of a machine gone wild.

The oiler leaped to his side. His face was ashen with fright. His hand trembled as he jerked the handle. The fireroom door opened, a square hole of eerie dust-filled light. Smeared faces appeared there with popping eyes, like faces staring out of a door of hell. Trask had no time for them. Under his hand the main engine slowed. The connecting rods took on shape and sanity again. She stopped.

There was no sound now but the scuttling of the auxiliaries, a low drone from the dynamo platform—and the wash of water. In that startling and unexpected stillness its hiss against the thin steel strakes of the ship was deafening.

The *Tamilar* lost way rapidly. Drifting. Rolling. An iron door banged closed. An unearthly sound. The wind came into its own, moaning in the rigging overhead. The fog dripped soiled globules on the engine-room skylight. The speaking tube from the bridge whistled shrilly. Trask clapped it to his ear.

"Well, well!" Captain Garrett's voice was an angry snarl. "What are you up to? What the devil do you mean by stopping her?"

"Can't help it," Trask barked into the tube. "Thrown her wheel. I'm not sure. Tell you later."

"Thrown her—you idiot! You can't stop her here! You'll have me piled on the rocks in——"

Couldn't stop her? No; of course not. Didn't suit him up there on the bridge. Wasn't ready for it—or was he?

Trask flung the tube from him and started across the floor plates for the shaft alley. Blistoe came waddling excitedly down the gratings, shouting as the first assistant dived into the narrow cave through which the ship's drive shaft runs out toward the stern and the screw.

When he reappeared to face the chief, his face was a little white, his eyes hard and cold. Cables rattled forward as Captain Garrett let the anchors go to keep the *Tamilar* off the coast.

Blistoe's lips curled. "The first night watch at sea in six months after the *Altair*, Trask, and you tear her guts out! What——"

"Snapped her tail shaft"—the first assistant's voice was level and icy—"aft of the stern coupling. She's taking water through the gland. Pretty bad. Sprung her after plates. If she——"

ABRUPTLY, he stopped talking. There was no sense to it. He had a sudden inexplicable feeling of rage as he stared at that blue-veined face eying

him with dispassionate disdain. He wanted to smash his fist at it to relieve the agony that was in him.

That clean ticket of his profession he'd wanted! First the *Altair* disaster—now this. He clenched his hands and turned away. He picked up a mallet and started with methodical severity to bang the bolts on the shaft-alley door. Keep the water out of the ship. The whole Pacific Ocean! Nothing but a thin plate of metal separated its green, impersonal obliterating depth from him, from them all. Gil Blistoe looked at his back. His lips drew queerly tight. Trask did not see it. The chief turned away, snarling orders as he wandered into the shadows.

Then the master came charging down to the engine room, Captain Garrett with his black eyes burning in their hollow sockets and his lips working on terrible oaths. His swearing sounded half-hearted, like a man going through a ritual. He stopped to face the chief at the log desk.

Trask suddenly remembered a similar conference on the splintered decks of the *Altair* off Tatoosh Light. He felt a strange stony calm, as if this was all quite usual and he knew what to expect.

"She takes water like a sieve, chief!" the master roared. "What in——"

"I can't help it," Blistoe put in throatily. "Talk to——"

"Clear out of it, then! She won't last half an hour. Get your crowd on deck while we've a chance to get a boat away. Lively now, if you don't want to drown down here."

He wheeled for the ladder, flailing his skinny arms. Trask saw the faces of the fireroom gang jerk away from the door. The oiler was already halfway up the gratings. Trask knew he was speaking, but his own voice seemed to him to be coming from a great distance.

"She can't be taking water any place but aft, captain. The ship's stone empty

and high as a liner out of the water. If we flood the forepeak and the for'ard ballast tanks she'll stand her stern clean out of the water. We can save her. I know we can!"

Captain Garrett, on the first step of the ladder, turned to cock a baleful eye on him.

"You know we can, hey? *You?* You crack-brained young fool! Blistoe, you talk to him if you want to. Damned if I'm going to drown!"

He dragged his bony frame out of sight. Trask and the chief were alone.

"Great Heaven, chief! The old man's off! You don't abandon a ship because——"

"No?" Blistoe jabbed a flabby finger at Trask's chest. "We were idiots to sign you on. Now we'll pay for it. You've done enough damage. When the *Altair* sank—so did you! Understand?"

He seized the handrail. But before he climbed out of the engine room, he hurled back over his shoulder: "Maybe if I were you, I'd stay here and drown. I'd hate to have to sit through another inquiry with that cracked ticket of yours."

Trask's jaw muscles twitched once. He was alone before the log desk. For an instant he stood motionless, facing the unnatural stillness of the monstrous main engine. Disconnected scraps of thought spun desperately in his stunned brain. Nora Madsen—alone up there! Plucky kid! Been exploring, she said, exploring on her own. A tramp ship at night, running in fog, was ominous-smelling as a beast. She'd heard Blistoe working—tempering metal in the cave of the shaft alley. It had frightened her. Couldn't blame——

Something snapped in Trask's brain—like a crash of lightning searing all things to blinding clarity. He understood at last what he had to do.

He spun on his heel. Quiet—the quiet was ghastly. The scuffling of the

auxiliaries made the stillness more intense, more unnatural. A dying ship. Half of her murdered; half of her struggling for life. Why had Blistoe left the pumps running? He was a scoundrel. Yes; but not altogether a fool.

Trask was suddenly aware that water slithered above the level of the floor plates, slimy, stealthy, crawling. He dived for the valves, darting through the deserted engine room, a shadow amid shadows. Then he came back and took the ladder for the deck with swift, sure bounds.

REACHING his own room off the starboard passageway, he was not surprised to find it open. He looked in. Nora was gone. Couldn't blame her. Any lubber would know something serious had happened. The *Tamilar's* hull shuddered no longer. She heaved now and again with a slow ominous lurch. Trask heard the faint crying of men at the boat falls. Tearing open a locker drawer, he jammed an automatic into his pocket and raced for the after well deck.

The fog was lifting a little, beating back upon the coast in smoky billows. Escaping steam sobbed at the *Tamilar's* funnel. A fantastic light hung over the heaving sea. Clouds of vapor hung in the hollows that rolled slowly toward the ship. She lay not a quarter of a mile from Arguello rocks. In the distance the surf swell gurgled and growled over black humps of stone, then gathered to rush roaring for the cliffs of the land. Trask climbed to the boat deck.

The davits were out. The loaded boat hung swaying high over the water. They were launching only one. It was enough. They hadn't far to go. Then he saw Nora Madsen facing Captain Garrett, who alone remained on the ship's slanting deck.

"What the devil are you doing aboard my ship?" he screamed at her.

She started to answer, her little fists clenched. Trask dived forward. She turned to him instead.

"Steve, they——"

"You know this woman?" the skipper roared.

"How should I know her?" Trask sprang for the gunwale of the lifeboat.

"Get aboard!" Gil Blistoe shouted, swinging in the stern sheets. "She won't last much longer!"

The master climbed into the boat. Nora stood at the rail, too overcome to move. He hair was wild. She stared at Trask in bewildered astonishment.

"Let go!" Captain Garrett barked. "Let her jump, wherever the hell she came from. We can't hang here all day!"

The mate's eyes narrowed. Some one else growled objections. But the ropes whined. The small boat dropped, slapping the water loudly. The blocks were unhooked; she floated away from the towering rust wall of the *Tamilar*.

The mate looked up. He didn't understand this at all. Nora Madsen still stood at the rail, wild-eyed and terrified.

"Jump, miss!" he shouted. "Jump! We'll pick you up!"

Trask was on his feet in the stern sheets.

"Stay where you are, Nora! Don't move! Stay where you are!"

"You beast!" she hurled down to him.

She had found her voice at last. Full of contempt it was, startlingly thin and clear, piercing the swirling fog and the loud hiss of water sucking the *Tamilar's* side. Trask heard it, but his face remained set and hard. The small boat drifted off. Oars clacked as they were shipped in the thole pins.

Trask gauged the distance in the flashing second. Then he flung himself through the air toward the swinging boat falls. His hands closed on the ropes. His palms burned with the fire of the

shock. He heard a chorus of shouts from the small boat. His body crashed against the *Tamilar's* hull and for a moment he hung there, gathering his strength with gritted teeth. Then hand over hand he climbed the steep iron side of the ship. Panting, he swung over the rail and dropped to the deck at Nora's side.

"You didn't have to come back for me." She backed away from him, her eyes cold with loathing. "I think I understand now. In spite of the *Altair*, in spite of everything, I thought you were decent and square and fine, Steve. I thought I loved you. I know now I hate you! I'm going to jump."

She sprang for the rail. Trask seized her roughly and flung her back.

"No; you're not! Keep quiet!" He looked down on the upturned startled faces of the *Tamilar's* crew drifting in an open boat. The sea heaved thickly. There was no wind left. Fog swirled in vague draperies about the heads of Captain Garrett and Blistoe, standing upright in the stern sheets. For the first time, Stephen Trask grinned at them, a broad grin full of pleasure and power.

"You can shove off now and be damned to you!" he shouted.

"Throw her over and jump yourself!" the master ordered. "She's five feet down by the head already!"

"Jump, you idiot!" Blistoe echoed. "To hell with her if she wants to drown!"

"No one's going to drown," Trask called across the water. "The *Tamilar* floats."

"You fool——"

"I can shut off a valve as easily as you can open it, Blistoe. The game won't work this trip. I'm filling the for'ard tanks. Understand? Her stern gland will be clear of the water line in fifteen minutes. There'll be no more leak. The first passing steamer tows us stern-first to port."

THE CAPTAIN'S cadaverous face went pale. He growled something at Blistoe. The chief waved his fist. Beside him, the mate threw a look at his master and stood up. He was a huge hairy man with a placid face and strong quiet eyes. Strange things had happened. They were beginning to clear. The chief officer turned his eyes to the hull of the *Tamilar* and frowned.

"What you mean to say, First?"

"Barratry!"

"You idiot!" Blistoe's voice was thick. "I'll have you broken for——"

"You forgot to take your oxyacetylene tubes and torch out of the shaft alley, chief. I know as well as you do that if you heat a steel shaft red, and then sluice it down with cold water it'll crystallize as sure as fate—and the first strain after that'll crack it apart. You timed it perfectly for my watch. Smart! But Nora Madsen——"

"Pull back for the ship! That idiot will——"

"I'll shoot the first man lays a hand on this ship!" Trask's automatic glittered with a blue light in his hand. "The *Tamilar* is a salvage. Get that through your skulls, Garrett, and you, too, Blistoe! She was abandoned at sea by all hands at the command of the master. Nora Madsen was never on the ship's articles. The *Tamilar* is hers by right of salvage. My pay stopped when the small boat hit the water. It's the law. I'm not on the articles any longer. I'm working for the salvor. Stand off!"

The small boat drifted closer. Trask's automatic barked. Two bullets sent thin jets of water skyward. The spray spat on Captain Garrett's face. Trask meant business. The mate in the small boat grinned suddenly. He was a slow-witted sailor, but at last he saw the light.

"I'll take care of 'em!" he shouted exultantly. "Bully for you, First! What'll I do with the swine?"

"Watch yourself! I don't know how many of 'em are in on this. Bring 'em

up to the 'Frisco customhouse. I'll see you at the inquiry!"

A gust of fog swept between them. Trask heard an angry oath, then a dull thump surprisingly like a fist meeting an unseen jaw. When he saw them again on a clear patch of water, the mate had the steering oar in his hand and the small boat moved toward the beach. Two black shapes lay on the bottom boards.

NORA MADSEN sobbed. Then her hand touched the first assistant's arm. He looked at her. They were alone on the deserted ship. The sea souged and burbled, racing languidly for the shore, while overhead pools of miraculous blue appeared in the soil of drifting fog.

"I've been a sort of fool, Steve."

"Not half, you haven't! If you hadn't gone exploring in the mid-watch, I'd never had sense enough to get onto their rotten game. This plays the devil with your vacation, though, Nora. You'll never get to Karachi now."

She smiled. "You weren't joking, Steve, about the *Tamilar* belonging to us now?"

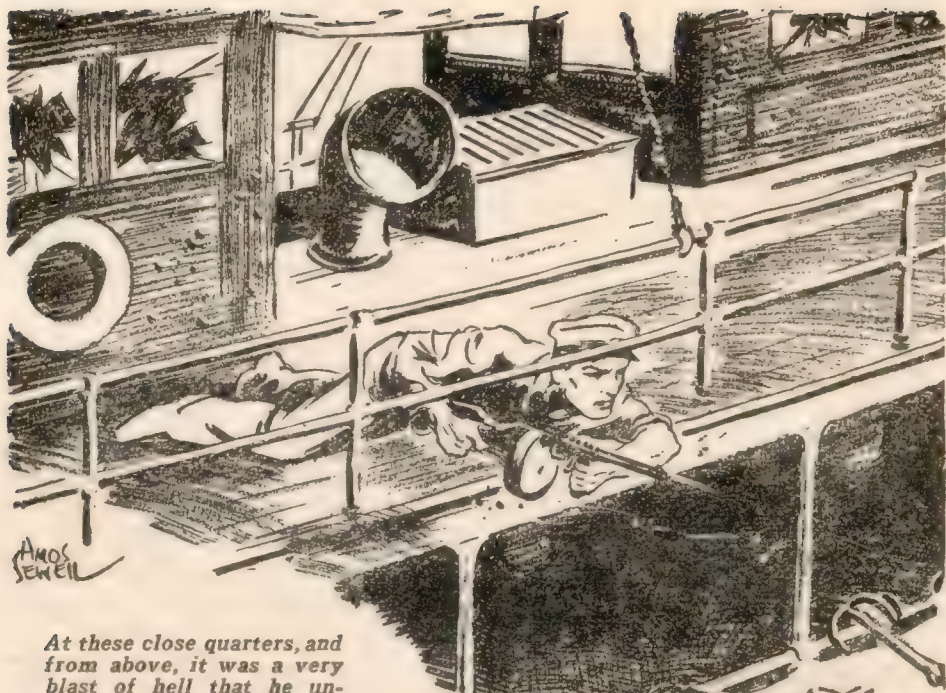
"In a way she does, all right." He grinned. "Won't the owners be gay when they get a juicy bill for salvage instead of a check for a total loss at sea from the underwriters!"

"Then I'm going to Karachi, anyhow! But it's a long way, isn't it, Steve?" she asked wistfully. "It would be terribly lonely—alone."

"Is that a proposition, Nora?"

"No." She shook her head. There was something more than a smile in her eyes. "A proposal."

"Nora!" They stood at the *Tamilar's* rail, close in each other's arms. Then: "Right now we'd better get along to the bridge. Got to send off a signal flare or two. We want a tow to port. Come along, Nora. Rockets! Rockets and a long blast of the whistle for Karachi!"



At these close quarters, and from above, it was a very blast of hell that he unleashed. Wood splintered, men reeled and fell—

JOHN GAUNT, the financier, whom newspaper reporters trailed as jackals trail a lion, had slipped up from Jacksonville to spend the week-end with James F. Tarrel on Jekyl Island. Theoretically none knew that he was there, for he could not afford to have it advertised that he was conferring with the industrial magnates who were house guests of the New York banker. Theoretically none knew that John Gaunt was slipping back to Jacksonville to-night, on the Tarrel cruiser *Iris*, to resume his vacation trip.

Young Captain Jack Adams of the *Iris* knew, however. Gaunt and his daughter had once returned from Europe on a liner on which Jack Adams had been a junior officer. Scowling into the velvety dusk from the bridge of the fast little motor yacht, he knew he was, in effect, custodian of a hundred million dollars for these few hours.

A
New
Story by
H. E. O. Whitman

Triple Piracy

Millionaires were no novelty, but incognitos were. Adams was alert.

That was why he sensed a sudden vibration in the cruiser's motors, an uneven lumbering in her smooth speed, before there was a sound from the engine room. Then pandemonium broke loose below, a tremendous booming clatter and rasping grind of metal. Automatically Captain Jack cut all switches, swung the yacht's head into the faint swell, and started down.

His new engineer-mechanic, one-man

*An adventure that
smacks of to-
day—and the
tang of the
sea!*

*Illustrated by
Amos Sewell*



crew, on short runs when no servants were aboard, tumbled up the hatchway to meet him in the spacious fore cockpit. Johnson's grimy face was scratched; he clutched his side as if in pain.

"Flywheel busted," he jerked out. "Tore hell out of everything. Piece must've gone through the bottom; water's pōurin' in."

Adams gripped the man's arm. "How could it break, you careless fool?" he snapped. He was a master mariner, not a mechanic, but he could swear the *Iris* had been in perfect shape when Sig Svenson left. "Touch off some rockets and get the dinghy overside," he ordered sharply, and leaped down to see.

It needed no mechanic to tell that the motors had been wrecked. Fragments of the heavy wheel, thrown with terrific centrifugal force, had smashed through steel like paper. Captain Jack recognized reality when he met it face to face. The *Iris* was doomed. Not only was there water, but it was rising fast.

He sprang back to the bit of deck. Two rockets had hissed into the moonless, star-strewn sky to release red balls that faded fitfully. Johnson had the dinghy out and was bringing John Gaunt's two bags from the cabin.

By the rail Gaunt, roused from his endless telegrams and memoranda, was muttering to himself. "What's wrong?" he growled.

Captain Jack shrugged his broad shoulders. "Disabled and sinking, sir," he said coolly. "We'll have to row ashore. No danger."

"Danger?" said Gaunt. In New York he never moved without a bodyguard, but evidently he had no thought of danger at a Tarrel house or on a Tarrel boat. "It's the delay. Where are we?"

In the dimness Adams smiled. John Gaunt, whose tireless efficiency timed even his vacations to a minute schedule, was going to be delayed this time. "Off

Amelia Island," he explained. "Below St. Mary's Entrance. Three miles out. We'll have you in Fernandina before you know it."

Gaunt growled, "Damned carelessness!" but Gaunt also recognized realities. He did not bother with futile fuming and idle questions.

Johnson, busy at the side, shouted "Ship ahoy!"

THEY scrambled up the tiny bridge to look. Two cable lengths astern another vessel was coming up, searchlight on and cabin ports aglow. In the starlight Adams guessed it to be a good-sized coasting schooner or schooner-yacht, running on auxiliary power, for its spars were bare. From its side a speed boat raced toward them.

As the boat thundered nearer, they made out two seamen in natty whites behind its bright headlamp. They cut out the motor to glide up.

"Ahoy, the cruiser!" one bawled. "Need help?"

Captain Jack Adams, frowning, hesitated. He could feel the *Iris* settling rapidly, but somewhere, he had a hunch, something was not right. After all, they were but three miles from shore.

John Gaunt did not hesitate. He was in a hurry. "Can you put us in at Jacksonville, or run us back to Fernandina?" he called.

"Off Fort George in an hour and a half," a sailor returned cheerily. "You're almost awash, mister."

"Come on!" said Gaunt.

Johnson passed over the bags; Adams, foregoing argument, dashed to salvage a few instruments and the log. The engineer jumped into the speed boat with strange alacrity, Gaunt following unassisted. The speedster was casting off when Captain Jack joined them. His orders were to take "Mr. Jones" to Jacksonville.

The motor broke into a roar. Adams had little time to cogitate before they

were going over the schooner's side. So far as he could judge, it was neither a coaster nor a yacht. It had the nondescript air of one, the trim lines of the other.

Another seaman led them aft. Adams tramped after him, eying with puzzled curiosity a small square wheelhouse before the raised after cabin. John Gaunt kept pace until he glimpsed two men in yachting caps who advanced to meet them. Bright beams from the wheelhouse fell on their faces.

Abruptly Gaunt halted, seizing Adams' wrist. "Wait!" he snapped and as abruptly darted for the gangway at which the speed boat waited to be swung aboard. "Skipper, come on!" he cried. "I've changed my mind."

Captain Jack stood stock-still a moment, dumfounded. The two sailors who had brought them off sprang by him and grasped Gaunt by the arm. He struggled with them fiercely.

"Adams!" he exclaimed. "It's a trick. Help!"

Adams hadn't the slightest idea what was wrong, but he knew when to act. He leaped for the struggling trio and jerked a sailor around. The man, twisting, swung a hairy fist. Captain Jack sent him reeling with a wild hook.

Several were on him at once then. He flung one off, was staggered by another, spun a third with a straight right. John Gaunt, for want of a better weapon, was flailing the air with his brief case. The two men in caps bore him down. Adams escaped a clutching clinch and planted a beautiful left on some one's nose.

The next instant a blackjack hit the back of his skull.

II.

ADAMS awakened to find himself in a very small berth in a very small and none-too-clean cabin that resembled a closet more than a stateroom. Dizzily he wondered if he could be back on his ex-navy captain father's pearler in the

South Seas, or on the Australian wheat ship on which he had served his first apprenticeship. Then he felt the pulsing of an auxiliary engine, and the evening's events came back.

He was on a big schooner too sleek to be a coaster, too dark to be a yacht. His head ached, his sides hurt. Across the cramped little compartment John Gaunt rocked his big, rawboned body on a canvas stool, murmuring as fine a collection of oaths as Captain Jack Adams had ever heard.

Adams sat up grinning. For a man reputed able to command a hundred million dollars, Gaunt had a gorgeous black eye. The other glared all the more balefully, like a sword point, hard and bright. Gaunt's tie had been torn awry, his thin iron-gray hair was rumpled, his deeply lined face was bitter, but his head was up and his heavy jaw stuck out.

Gaunt looked over and sneered. "A fine skipper!"

"Easy!" said Captain Jack, swinging unsteadily to his feet. His head brushed the ceiling. "The *Iris* was first-class—yesterday. Where's that engineer? Young Tarrel hired him last week to oblige some drunk he'd met. That's my side. What's yours? Why the devil did you start that row?"

"Row!" Gaunt snorted. "Do you think I want to be on a ship run by a scoundrel I sent to prison? Damn your engineer. It's a plot."

Captain Jack's head did not throb so much that it could not absorb plain fact. He rocked on his heels and stared down at the financier's granitelike features. "So-oh!" he said. He was thinking of that reputed hundred million dollars. "Door's locked, is it? And they know who you are. Lost anything? Where's your brief case?"

"I threw it overboard," said John Gaunt grimly. "And let me tell you, young man——"

Adams' head was beginning to spin.

He thrust a long finger under Gaunt's nose. "Let me tell *you*," he interrupted. "I may be a damned salt-water chauffeur to you, but I had my first watch when I was ten. If I got you into this I'll get you out."

He sat down on the berth. Gaunt gazed at him in astonishment. He was really observing Tarrel's skipper for the first time. He took note of the power suggested by the lean, rangy frame, the strength of bold, well-cut brow and nose and chin, the cool, devil-may-care gleam of ice-blue eyes under sun-bleached blond hair. Save that he had been darker, Gaunt had been a young man like that himself.

With surprising agility Gaunt rummaged in the ransacked bags that had been thrown into the compartment after them. He found a heavy silver flask undisturbed. He unscrewed the top and handed the flask to Captain Jack.

"Take some of that," he said. "I can get myself out, son."

Adams drank the best part of a gill of brandy in two gulps. It eased the soreness of his skull amazingly, diffused a friendly glow. Gaunt took back the flask and did as well. Adams regarded him with more respect. He had assumed that Gaunt was a hard, self-centered man, accumulating money and power as mechanically as a binder accumulates wheat, but it seemed that the head of a hundred million dollars' worth of corporations could be human.

"We'll get along." He grinned. "Now what?"

"We'll soon see. They'll come when they hear voices."

Some one was coming already. Heavy steps clumped in a passageway, the door was unlocked and flung open. Two brawny, ugly seamen holding belaying pins glared in.

"Boss wants you," one said to Gaunt.

Gaunt pulled his tie into place and buttoned his coat. His lined mouth curled in a sneer. "My friend comes

with me," he declared, "or your boss can go to hell."

The seamen scowled, especially one who had a swollen nose. "Get going," he growled.

Gaunt and Adams went out and climbed ladderlike companion stairs to turn into the after house.

THE TWO MEN in yachting caps and untidy blue suits were lounging in the untidy main cabin, a whisky bottle and glasses on a stand between their wicker easy-chairs. They winked at each other and chuckled at John Gaunt's black eye. The chuckles grated on Captain Jack. He surveyed the pair narrowly, not unforgetful of the sailors at his back.

One of the two was a muscular young man who would have been handsome had it not been for a certain weakness about his pale, sloping features, a lurking viciousness about his resentful eyes and mouth. The butt of a pistol carried in a shoulder holster protruded from his coat.

The other looked more formidable. He was a big brute, burned to a mahogany color incongruous with light red hair. Against it his eyes squinted a cold green above a broken nose. Red hair and tattoo marks on his barrel chest showed through the shirt he wore half open. His wide grin added a distinct resemblance to a wolf.

Gaunt stared at them impassively. "Well?" he challenged.

The muscular young man leered. "Remember me?"

"I don't forget skunks," Gaunt said coolly.

The taunt produced results. Features contorted, the "skunk" started up. The red giant negligently extended a big foot and shoved him back.

"Belay that!" he roared, and showed Gaunt his teeth.

Gaunt did not smile. "I suppose you're the master of this vessel," he said

crisply. "For your information, I took your friend Urley fresh from college and gave him a chance to go ahead. He repaid me by selling secrets from my office and stealing from me to speculate on them. He's been in prison the last three years."

The red man's grin widened. "I've been in prison myself, pop."

"I see," said Gaunt. Coolly he took a blank check from an inside pocket and tapped its edge on his hand. "How much to land us in Jacksonville?"

"More'n I could get a check cashed for," the giant chuckled.

The lines about Gaunt's lips deepened; that was all. "Kidnaping at sea is piracy," he reminded. "They hang men for that."

The red brute yawned. "What's that got to do with it? No piracy in pickin' some men off a sinkin' boat, is there? Nobody laid a hand on you till you tried to swipe my launch."

For once Gaunt seemed nonplused.

Captain Jack stepped boldly forward. "What's your name, skipper?" he inquired.

"Call me Brace, bub."

"Wolf Brace, I think," said Adams. "I've heard of you. Mine's Adams. Not 'bub.' I've a ticket. You won't, when this is over. What's the game?"

"Just be good boys till I say different."

Captain Jack looked Brace in the eye. Secretly he was watching Urley, whose resentful gaze had not left Gaunt.

"Don't be a fool," he said. "Every ship and half the planes from Savannah to Miami will be looking for us in the morning. Take your gravy while you can."

"Yeah?" Brace laughed. "Don't be a fool yourself, bub. They won't know but what you went down with that toy boat you had. And they'll hush it up till they do know, for fear Gaunt stocks go down."

Adams turned to Gaunt. "That right, sir?"

As he hoped, all eyes turned to the rawboned financier. In that split second Adams acted. He threw himself on Urley.

With one arm he flung the pale young man back in the chair, with the other hand snatched the pistol from its holster. In almost the same motion he whirled against the wall, the automatic leveled. "Nobody moves," he said curtly.

His attack had been so swift that nobody had had time to move. But "Wolf" Brace fell back and roared with merriment.

Adams frowned at him.

"Go ahead," said Brace. "Shoot! D'you think I'd let a lubber carry a loaded gun on my ship?"

Captain Jack looked down at the gun in his hand. "If you're lying, Brace —" he said through set teeth and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened. The two sailors with belaying pins were grinning; not even the snarling Urley made an offensive gesture. Adams pulled back the slide and tried again. Then he grinned wryly.

"You win, Brace," he acknowledged and tossed the empty weapon into Urley's lap. "What do we do?"

"Go to bed," said Brace. "Before I get annoyed."

Gaunt and Adams went to bed, the seamen at their heels.

III.

CAPTAIN JACK reclined in the berth and cursed himself aloud for not playing his momentary hunch that something, somewhere, was not right. His engineer-mechanic Johnson, without doubt, had wrecked the *Iris* deliberately. The schooner had been lying in wait for them, lights out; otherwise it would have been sighted long before. And he,

who had won his master's ticket far younger than most men, had been taken in.

But only Tarrel and his guests, and Gaunt's own daughter and secretary, had been supposed to know Gaunt was at Jekyl Island, and returning secretly alone.

"I know," said Gaunt, rocking on his stool, "it's too confounded queer. Urley's a vindictive rascal, but he went to prison broke. The big brute is obviously a tool. I'd like to know their principal. It was rotten luck about the gun."

"Yes," said Adams dryly. "I'm surprised I'm not in irons in the hold right now. Though this is bad enough."

Gaunt shrugged. A few hours ago he had been immersed in work and plans, wasting no hour of a vacation. Now, with all his plans disrupted, faced with unknown obstacles and delays, very probably in physical danger, he accepted fate with a gambler's stoicism. He had not attained success by whining or railing at things he could not help. But when he could help them, Adams suspected, there would be hell to pay.

The schooner rode smoothly, making knots. The cramped cabin vibrated with the engine; in the passageway they could hear the occasional clump of a sentinel. Gaunt shook his silver flask against his ear and handed it over. They drank in silence. Nobody had offered food, if that indicated anything.

"You know this Brace?" Gaunt queried.

Adams pointed to the slotted ventilator set in the door. Gaunt pulled the stool over; their conversation faded to a whisper.

"Heard of him in Bimini and Havana," said Adams. "Rum runner, hijacker, gun runner, dope and chink smuggler for any one who pays. Said to be a killer, though never caught at it. Seems a good-natured devil when he has the upper hand."

"I was wondering how he happened to fall in with Urley. And who's in with them who could follow my movements well enough to hatch a scheme like this. Ransom, of course?"

"I suppose. I just horned in by accident. Have you any enemies?"

"Plenty," said Gaunt. "But none likely to be crazy enough to try anything like this." He chewed on a cigar moodily; it was evident the extent of the plot bothered him. "They may plan to land us before morning, to leave us here under guard."

Adams glanced out through their one porthole at the stars. The only trouble with that theory was that the schooner was heading east-southeast. The port was too small for any man to squeeze through; water lapped a few feet below.

Gaunt was contemplating him hopefully.

Adams shook his head. "No go. But we'll get out somehow. Take a nap until that man out there gets sleepy."

Philosophically, Gaunt took off coat, tie, and shoes. Adams assisting, with handkerchiefs he made a cold compress for his eye. Then he accepted the lower berth and presently began to snore.

Adams turned off the single light and wriggled into the upper berth, but he did not snore. He thought. Old John Gaunt, who was proving far from old at fifty-five, might have his nerves under such control that he could sleep or work in any circumstances, but in his heart he must know his peril. Smugglers of Chinese had been known to sink their passengers to destroy evidence when facing capture; Wolf Brace might be no more scrupulous.

True, Brace was not likely to be pushed to any such last resort before he had Gaunt in more secure hiding, but Adams preferred to run his own risks as rapidly as they confronted him. He was unpleasantly aware that he personally was not worth ransoming. And he

would be Gaunt's only witness when it came to future retaliation.

Through the open port he heard, overhead, spasmodic roars of laughter. Wolf Brace was celebrating, and Adams recalled what Gaunt had said. It had been indeed a bold and clever coup, and its accomplishment had taken time and money and intimate knowledge. Who had planned it? If they were making for a rendezvous, the situation might soon be worse.

The sounds died out after midnight. Slowly a possible plan formed in Adams' mind. It was a desperate attempt, but its very simplicity gave it a chance, and he knew the potency of liquor as an ally. He swung lightly to the floor and touched Gaunt's shoulder in the dark.

Gaunt, awakening alert, whispered "Yes?"

"Can you groan?" said Adams.

Gaunt groaned.

"Keep it up," whispered Captain Jack. "I'm going to try to get our guard inside. Be ready to help. These swabs can't be very bright."

GAUNT entered into his rôle with the intent singleness of purpose that had made him great. His groans grew realistically in volume. After a few minutes Adams thumped his feet as if alighting from the upper berth.

"What's the matter?" he demanded in a penetrating speaking voice, switching on the light.

"It's my side again," said Gaunt. "The doctors told me to avoid exertion. I've got to have an ice pack. If these brutes kill me——"

Adams took a heavy step to the door and pounded.

The sentinel, however sleepy, was on the job. "Avast the noise," he rumbled through the ventilator. "What's the matter?"

"The old gent's sick," said Adams. "To hell with the noise. Go get Brace.

He can't have anything happening now. Hurry up, you oaf."

The seaman was silent, presumably trying to think. Adams held his breath. If the man's orders were not to leave the passage all night there might be hope.

"I'll look at him," the guard decided and unlocked the door.

At least he intended to be cautious. He entered with a revolver leveled and stared hard from the doorway.

"Don't be an idiot," Adams snapped. "He's sick. We've got to get an ice pack or he'll need a surgeon quick."

Taking the cue, Gaunt writhed and groaned in extreme pain. He did it so well the sailor bent forward to peer at him. Simultaneously Captain Jack put all his weight into a short, crushing blow that caught the man under the exact angle of his jaw.

The sentinel toppled with glazing eyes. Adams jerked the revolver from numbed fingers and eased the dead weight half on the berth. Gaunt sprang up and closed the door. The seaman was unconscious, a clean knock-out.

With careful haste they bound the man's hands and feet with strips torn from a sheet, used more strips to make a gag. They lashed him in the berth, face to the side wall, and covered him up until only the back of his head was visible.

Captain Jack put on the sailor's hat. "That's that," he muttered. "Got rubber soles? The rest is luck."

Recalling his last experience, he opened the revolver. It was loaded with blanks. Brace did not intend to have his captive shot by accident.

Adams grinned. The pistol might do for bluff, and he knew how to use the butt. He put out the light and they slid into the little passageway.

A single electric bulb gave the low, narrow corridor a dim illumination. The guard had had a stool near the door, and beside it lay a belaying pin. Cap-

tain Jack handed the traditional weapon to Gaunt and bade him wait.

He surmised the schooner had been built or remodeled for a yacht, then altered more by Brace. In all, four tiny staterooms opened into the short passage, with a heavy bulkhead at each end. Apparently all were unoccupied, and he crept up the steep steps to the deck.

The companionway opened into the entrance to the after house, opposite another giving access to the engine room. The cubicle little wheelhouse, probably lightly armored for Brace's varied occupations, screened it from the deck. Small staterooms in either corner of the low deck house, set far back like a poop, formed another short passage into the main cabin. The whole working mechanism of Brace's ship was centered here.

Save for the stars the deck was dark. The wheelhouse door was closed; down the corridor Adams made out no forms in the lighted cabin. On hands and knees he crawled out and around the corner of the deck house. Crouching, he made his way along the rail and rounded the stern before he peeped in through a cabin window.

Wolf Brace reclined in the same easy-chair, head lolling on his great chest. On a cushioned bench against the wall lay the weakly handsome Urley, sound asleep. On a similar bench opposite was sprawled the traitorous Johnson who had cost Captain Jack his craft and John Gaunt his liberty.

Adams was tempted to take advantage of the opportunity, but his responsibility for Gaunt forbade. He had a score to settle with Johnson, and one with Brace, that he vowed to pay upon the first occasion.

He edged forward again along the rail. The helmsman made it impossible for him to go far. The speed boat was cradled on a forward deck house that took the place of a forecastle. Galley and crew's quarters there were dark, but

he could distinguish a blob of white that must be a man lying on the main hatch. Allowing for a lookout on the bow and a man in the engine room, the watch included at least five men.

Scowling, Captain Jack crept his precarious way to rejoin Gaunt. In terse whispers he gave his findings. "My guess is," he concluded, "they're to meet another boat or get a message. Why are they waiting up?"

"You're skipper," said Gaunt. "What can we do?"

"Take your choice. We can knock Brace in the head and take the after house, but unless we can get at guns and subdue the crew we'll still be prisoners. Or we can try lowering the dinghy that's hanging over the quarter and trust to Heaven they won't miss us in time to turn around and pick us up—and that some other ship will come along that will."

"I vote for taking the ship," said Gaunt, tightening his jaw.

Adams grinned approvingly. Gaunt knew how to fight. But they were two against twelve or more; the arms Brace carried were not likely to be reached easily; taking the cabin would be only the beginning of a fight that might be to the death. He had seen enough to believe Brace's men were as tough as their boss.

He shook his head. "I'd prefer it myself, but I can't afford to have you hurt. We'll take the dinghy if we can. Put on all the clothes you can and leave the bags."

IV.

IN THE companionway they listened. There were no sounds other than the swish of water, the creak of hull and rigging, the throbbing of the engine. With infinite stealth they crawled around the deck house and paused to look.

The blob of white on the hatch and the three men inside the cabin had not moved. Crouching in the shelter of

the deck house, Adams examined the dinghy. It was watered and provisioned, big enough to take the place of gig or cutter, fitted with mast and sail. The blocks it swung from were well oiled, the tackle smooth from use.

Satisfied, he motioned Gaunt in and followed. If any one looked now they were lost—but no one looked. They lowered away with care, so that the little boat scarcely slapped the water. Captain Jack cast loose before it could begin to pitch. They knelt, balancing, while it tossed in the propeller's wash.

Silently they watched the schooner slide into the night. Its trim lines and graceful spars merged with the dark, the reflection from the cabin ports faded with the faint phosphorescence of its wake. Soon only its running lights were visible, until they were lost among the stars. The dinghy rocked alone.

John Gaunt sighed and pulled his coat about him. The air was cold. "Thank Heaven, we're clear of them," he said. "How far are we from land? Will this weather last?"

"Eighty miles or so," said Adams. The schooner was as fast as any auxiliary vessel had a right to be. "It will be calm enough another day or two. Brace may have picked us up by then, if nothing else does. You'd better try to sleep."

Gaunt curled up in the bow, perhaps remembering far-off days when he had slept on barren rock. Jack stepped the mast, set the bit of sail, lashed the tiller, and leaned back in the stern sheets wrapped in a spare canvas. What little breeze there was from the trade winds would take them in the direction they wished to go, and if he dozed off any variation would awaken him. They could do no more to-night.

Dawn had broken clear and chill before he realized he had slept. Streaks of red and gold heralded the sun's approach in the eastern sky. By the sail Gaunt was standing upright, flexing his

stiff muscles. Adams warmed himself as best he could by similar exercise and measured out provisions and water.

"Breakfast is served," he announced.

Gaunt smiled at the cold, dry food, but beneath its gray stubble his granite face was stern. "I still say we should have tried to capture the ship," he said.

"Mr. Tarrel's no fool," said Adams. "Neither is your secretary, I assume. They'll know we could have made shore easily. They can send out searching planes without broadcasting an alarm or using your name. There's an even chance one will spot us. If not, we'll make land ourselves to-morrow if we aren't picked up by a ship."

"You're right," said Gaunt. "Revenge can wait."

They settled down with patience. Captain Jack restored his circulation with an hour's rowing. Gaunt insisted on doing a stretch and proved his claim to good condition. The mild breeze held, and Adams trimmed sail and boat to make the most of it. From time to time, they rowed all morning. Gaunt admitted he had forgotten that eighty miles could be so far. Adams did not tell him how little of it they had covered.

Twice they saw smoke on the horizon, but except for that the sea remained a blank expanse. The sun grew warm. Captain Jack rigged the spare sail into an awning. They exchanged anecdotes of cruises and hunting expeditions, made an unappetizing lunch, took turns watching and napping.

And then, toward mid-afternoon, Adams awoke to find Gaunt gripping his arm triumphantly.

"A ship!" said Gaunt. "I thought I saw a plane, 'way to the west, a while ago, but surely this will see us. Look!"

Adams looked. A ship was clearly visible in the northeast and rising steadily. "They've sighted us before this," he assured. "But—it may be Brace."

Gaunt's lined features contracted.

Even he could tell the stranger was heading directly toward them.

They stared at it in grim silence, cursing the lack of glasses.

At length Adams chuckled. "Not the schooner. A seagoing yacht. Probably Diesel-powered; there's no funnel. I'll deliver you in Jacksonville yet, Mr. Gaunt."

THE YACHT rose fast. Gaunt had a feeling he had seen it before; yachts of that size could not be common. Painted white, it had a sleek and rakish look. Presently it was near enough to distinguish men in uniform standing on the bridge walk atop the fore end of the midships superstructure that broke the flush deck.

Captain Jack stood up in the stern sheets and waved. The yacht had slowed and was surging up on momentum.

"Ahoy, the boat!" a stocky man in master's uniform hailed from the bridge. "In distress?"

"Adams, master motor cruiser *Iris*, lost by barratry," Captain Jack returned. "Adrift with passenger returning to Jacksonville."

"Come aboard. Yacht *Privateer*, Inship master, cruising under charter."

Landing stairs were lowered. Adams sculled over and a sailor ran down and caught his line. Wearily John Gaunt went up.

The stocky man had come down from the bridge to shake hands with them on deck. He was middle-aged and weather-beaten; a long scar across his brown cheek gave him a sinister cast.

"We'll make you comfortable," he promised. "Come below and we'll see what you need. My owner will be out soon."

"First I must send a radiogram," said Gaunt.

Captain Jack had ceased to hear. The dinghy had been swung to davits, the landing stairs raised. The yacht was again in motion. But crossing the fore

deck from the rail, he recognized the false engineer who had sunk the *Iris*.

No crime rankles in a shipmaster's mind like barratry, and Adams no longer had to think first of Gaunt. Without a word he sprang after the traitor. Johnson, hurrying off furtively, did not know he had been discovered until Captain Jack was at his heels. He wheeled and dodged, but Adams caught him by the collar.

Johnson was a heavy man, yet his teeth rattled as Adams shook him. "Blast you!" rapped Adams. "How did you get here? Who paid you to wreck our ship?"

The ex-engineer clubbed with his arms. Captain Jack let go and planted a fist in his mid-section. Johnson doubled up. Adams straightened him with a furious uppercut. Johnson sprawled on the deck.

Two sailors had run up; they tried to take Adams' arms. He shook them off and reached for Johnson's collar to drag him to the yacht's master. Another hand pulled him away.

"Stand back, you sap!" rasped a sneering voice.

Urley, handsome face puffy, eyes vicious, was covering him with the same automatic. "It's loaded now," he taunted. "Try it."

Captain Jack did not need to think to put two and two together. Behind Urley the *Privateer's* captain was approaching, scarred cheek twisted in a grin. John Gaunt, trailing him, wore an expression of angry bewilderment.

Once more Urley had been unable to keep his resentful gaze from Gaunt. Before he knew it was happening, Captain Jack had torn the pistol from his grasp with one reckless, lightning motion. A shot exploded harmlessly into the air. Adams bounded back to the rail. Gaunt skipped across and joined him with surprising nimbleness.

Inship paused, making a semiring with Urley and the sailors.

Captain Jack trained the automatic on them. "Captain," he said grimly, "the man I knocked down wrecked my craft last night. The one who drew this gun helped to shanghai us afterward. We'll all stand quietly while you tell us what they're doing here. The same thing doesn't happen to me twice."

"Doesn't it?" cut in a decisive, sarcastic voice above.

From the bridge two other men looked down on them—the stalwart, natty yachtsman who had spoken, and a swarthy individual in gray who aimed a submachine gun at Adams' chest.

Captain Jack stared, vaguely aware that Gaunt had given a choked gasp.

"Put down the pistol, Adams," ordered the yachtsman. "You've interfered with my plans enough."

Adams glanced about the little circle on the deck. He comprehended now why Inship's flat features had a sinister cast, why Urley's were vicious, why the seamen were a surly, hard-looking lot despite their uniforms. They had found the master mind behind Gaunt's plot, or, rather, he had found them. He tossed the automatic overboard.

"Good!" said the yachtsman. "Now I'll come down and welcome my dear friend John."

Gaunt said "Geoff Bland!" in a tone compounded of curse and groan.

V.

ADAMS leaned against the rail and scowled. He had heard of Geoffrey Bland, the speculator who had made and lost a dozen fortunes, but somehow it was impossible to imagine any one's bridging the gap from Wall Street to Wolf Brace.

James F. Tarrel, true, was accustomed to referring to Bland as "that pirate," but financial piracy was a far cry from kidnaping on the high seas. Yet Captain Jack was bitterly sure the subma-

chine gun and surly rogue confronting him meant business. But even so——

The trouble was that John Gaunt was not finding it incredible. Gaunt's rugged countenance was a stony mask, his keen eyes were steeled to impenetrable defiance. Of all the men Gaunt had been prepared to face, he clearly did not consider Geoffrey Bland less menacing.

Inship had given a curt command. The sailors retreated, to be replaced by another compact, swarthy individual in a gray suit who held another submachine gun at the alert. Urley loitered near by, gloating with vindictive malice. The yachtsman strode up briskly.

Captain Jack observed him with a feeling of unreality. Bland was so perfect a picture of debonair worldliness they all should have been friends together on a pleasure cruise. Then he met Bland's eyes. Restless, inscrutable, mocking, their tawny depths seemed somehow wild and somehow wicked. The castaways' predicament was very real.

Geoffrey Bland was ten years younger than Gaunt, tall, robust, athletic. Hair and close-cropped mustache were black, his firm cheeks well-tanned. The full lips between high-arched nose and pointed chin were arrogantly ironic. Given the wig and costume of a former century, he would have made a splendid court villain.

He flashed John Gaunt a smile as ominous as Wolf Brace's leering grin. "I warned you that you would hear from me again," he said.

Gaunt regarded him steadily. "Well?"

"Is that my only thanks for saving you from the watery deep?" Bland giped. He turned to Adams and looked him up and down. "If you value your life, young man," he remarked, "you'll stop knocking my men about. They're rather handy with gun and knife, and you're rather in the way, you know."

Captain Jack shrugged.

Gaunt said dispassionately: "You al-

ways were a dramatic scoundrel, Bland. This is in the open now. Do you put us ashore or do we stay here until they run you down like the hate-crazed fool you are?"

"Neither, Gaunt," retorted Bland. "We go for a voyage, you and I. Oh, a long, long voyage, while I play solitaire with your famed Gaunt stocks, and the Gaunt fortune becomes a myth. A voyage so long that *you* may not come back."

He paused, savoring the triumph in the words. "Unless, my dear Gaunt," he added silkily, "you prefer to cut me in on the Pelman consolidation promotion."

Gaunt did not wince; he stiffened. "In that case," he said grimly, "I'll be here a long time. Until you get ready to murder me, in fact."

Bland bared strong, white teeth wickedly. "You'll find everything ready for a long stay, Gaunt. Or the other, if you prefer. For the time being I'll even let you keep your youthful friend. But, remember, my dear John, I profit and you lose, either way. Now go below and digest *that*."

The man in gray gestured with his black gun.

Bland stepped over to Urley. "Urley," he lashed in a sharp tone that every man near the foredeck could hear, "you've disobeyed your orders and bungled twice. You assume too much. Let this remind you."

He whipped over a blow that took Urley in the mouth. Urley reeled. Recovering, he made no reply, but there was murder in his glare.

"We'll have no more disobedience on this ship," Bland barked at Inship. "See to it."

He swaggered back and tapped Adams on the shoulder. "If you should have a brilliant thought, young man," he said, "I have four bodyguards who shoot to kill. And there's enough evidence in a safety-deposit box in New York to

hang any man who might succumb to bribe or blandishment."

"Brace, too?" Adams grinned.

COOLLY he marched off behind John Gaunt. A Filipino steward guided them through a luxurious lounge in the deck house and down broad stairs to a guest suite on the lower deck. It had a roomy sitting room between two state-rooms, one with shower, one with bath. Heavy glass ports were screwed down tight, and the one door into the corridor was steel. Even the furniture was modernistic steel, upholstered, and every object adaptable for tool or weapon was bolted down.

The steward pointed to fresh yachting flannels and linen laid out on the beds and withdrew. The blank-faced man in gray backed out; the lock clicked. Without a word John Gaunt turned on water for a bath and began taking off his clothes.

Tactfully, Adams followed suit. Gaunt had had a crushing setback; Gaunt would want to think. A shave, a shower, and he was dressed before the financier was out of the tub. Bland's garments, if they were Bland's, would fit them very well except for a little looseness in the waist.

Brows wrinkled, he prowled about the sitting room. A cellaret in a corner proved well-stocked, and he helped himself to a drink as he surveyed the apartment. There were too many preparations for prisoners in evidence to be reassuring. Bland, to have a floating prison and a crew that he could trust or cow, must have worked on his plot for months. His attack on Gaunt was not a whim.

Gaunt appeared, pulling on a coat. "Damn it all, skipper," he burst out, "the man's insane! I knew he hated me, was near ruin, but I never dreamed of this. Though I did hear he was threatening me, after our last brush in the market. But kidnaping, piracy—I

didn't realize any one would go mad enough for that. He can't turn back; he's desperate."

"But clever," said Adams. "To plant Johnson with the Tarrels, and have you spied on, and hire Brace to pick us up or take us, if barratry failed. Then you were to be transferred to him out here, so that he would have an alibi if by any mishap Brace was identified or overhauled. It was pure hard luck we were still in the dinghy when he met Brace, found we'd escaped, and came back to look. He has nerve."

He smiled. "But we've one bluff left. They didn't search us, so Brace didn't tell them, or didn't know, his sentinel had lost a gun. I've hidden it in the cushions of that divan. We'll save it for a last resort and look for a chance to pinch some .38 shells that aren't blanks."

Gaunt shook his head. "It's hopeless now, skipper. I see it all. It's as he says. No matter what I do, whether I live or die, he can profit by what he knows."

"Nonsense," said Adams. "No one would dare harm *you*."

"I suppose sinking a fifty-thousand-dollar cruiser is a practical joke," Gaunt countered grimly. "And that yachts carry gangsters with machine guns just for fun. Damn it, Geoff Bland has hated me for twenty years! Four times I've had to break him as remorselessly as I would a snake. I've had him indicted for copying Gaunt company names to float worthless stock. I've had him suspended from the stock exchange for market rigging. If he's gone this far, do you think he'd stop at anything?"

Pausing, Gaunt gnawed on a black cigar. His haggard face looked old, his bowed head seemed crushed. "If Mortimer and Tarrel only use their heads!" he muttered. "But who would think of a madman? If only I could let Sally know I am alive!"

Captain Jack held up his hand. The yacht, which had been flying eastward

at express-boat speed, was slowing down. The cabin was too nearly soundproof to admit ordinary sounds, but gradually the drone of a speed boat became audible. They dashed to the ports, but the landing stairs were on the other side of the ship.

Gaunt glanced at Adams. The latter had to tell the truth. "Sorry!" he said gently. "Probably only Brace. Bland left the slower schooner behind when he rushed after us this morning; now Brace is in a hurry to see if we've been caught. They may be trying not to use the radio, even for a secret code."

Almost immediately the lock clicked.

One of the squat, dark men in gray poked his head through the door and pointed with a drawn pistol. "Boss wants you," he said to Adams with a flat and empty grin.

VI.

BRACE'S schooner was not in sight, except possibly through glasses, when Captain Jack was herded into the lounge. Wolf was there, however, seated at a little table opposite Geoffrey Bland. Urley and Inship lurked farther back; another man in gray was seated near the stairs, opaque eyes watchful.

Wolf Brace and Bland apparently had been having a none-too-friendly discussion, interrupted by Adams' arrival. He felt the tension between the two as he strode up. Bland's features were frozen in a disdainful sneer; Brace had forgotten his fang-baring smile and was leaning forward, green eyes narrowed into slits.

"Adams," Bland demanded, "just how did you get away from Brace this morning?"

"Tricked his guard into our cubby-hole and knocked him out," said Captain Jack shortly. "Came on deck and saw the three swabs in the cabin were drunk and asleep. Got the dinghy over and cast loose. Why?"

Brace favored him with a malevolent glare and seemed about to spring.

Bland leveled a warning finger. "Wolf," he said harshly, "you told me you let them get away purposely, so I could pick them up and have a further alibi. I don't like men who lie to me."

Red face wrathful, Brace half arose. "Dammit, no more do I!" he roared, fists clenched into big red knots. "If I'd known who you were hijackin' and what you stood to make, d'you think I'd gone for such a lousy cut? You started this lyin', mister, and, damn your eyes, you'll finish it! This ain't nice quiet smugglin' in the dark. I want a fair share."

"You get a fair share," snapped Bland. "You've got the order on Havana to release your pay. Do you want to finish the deal or not?"

Brace glared around from under bushy brows. It was plain he would have liked to give vent to rage, to throttle Adams, to speak his mind to Bland. Captain Jack, vigilant, thought he saw Wolf glance at Urley and Urley nod.

"Oh, I'll go," Brace said surlily. "We'll cruise along behind and listen a couple of days to see if you need the hideaway. But I'm telling you——"

A hoarse hail sounded dimly from the bridge. "Plane ho!"

Inship went out quietly. Brace looked up, and Bland laughed.

"Don't be so nervous, Wolf," he mocked. "Here's your cash bonus for not having been seen. Your's too, Urley, and see there's no more bungling. What's a plane?"

Even the man by the stairs had fixed his greedy gaze on the two thin packets of currency Bland flung down. Unobtrusively Adams had been edging backward to the side windows. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a silver seaplane flash by, not half a mile away and flying low. It vanished in a bank as if it was circling back, and his heart leaped.

Inship rushed in on his short legs. "Plane's landing, mister," he called to Bland and rushed out.

For a second three men stood agape at the little table. Stiffing a curse, Bland made for the starboard doorway. Brace and Urley hurried after. Like a shot Captain Jack was out through the open doors to port before the guard in gray, distracted a single second, could remember he had a prisoner.

As he had hoped, Adams found the deck deserted on that side. Every one was gathering to starboard to watch the alighting plane. He could not see it now, but he could hear its motor, throttled down to a bare whine. His pulse was pounding.

Reg Tarrel, the banker's sporting son, owned and flew a silver monoplane, low-winged, and fitted with pontoons.

QUICKLY he slipped along the deck house toward the open after deck. A sharp call signaled an alarm. A backward glance revealed Urley and a man in gray darting from the lounge. Captain Jack began to run. A startled sailor appeared aft. Adams spied another open doorway in the superstructure and pivoted in.

He was in the yacht's dining saloon. He spied a closed door on the opposite side and raced for it. It was flung open, and he collided with Wolf Brace.

They grappled by instinct.

"You would, would you?" growled Brace, and swung a mighty fist.

Adams could have asked no more. He shot an uppercut between Brace's arms and followed it with a left smash to Brace's stomach. Brace recoiled, and Adams wheeled to find another exit. He was scarcely in time to meet Urley, plunging up behind.

Captain Jack ducked automatically. Urley, carried by momentum, sprawled over him, and Adams caught him around the knees and straightened with a heave. Urley somersaulted into Brace, but

Adams had no opportunity to see them fall together. The man in gray was on him, striking with the flat of an automatic, and Captain Jack knocked him into a table with a straight one-two.

Across the saloon the seaman was picking up a chair. Adams wheeled again and vaulted to the door over Brace and Urley, who were struggling to pick themselves up. He heard a bullet whistle with a pistol's report, but he was out on deck.

He dared not stop now to consider; he had to let circumstances guide him. Brief as his flight and fight had been, three men were starting the motors of Brace's launch, lying at the landing stairs. The plane rocked gently not twenty yards away, one helmeted figure standing up in a cockpit, a helmeted head showing above another. The propeller was turning lazily—and it was Reg Tarrel's *Sirius*.

Ten yards from where he stood, Bland and Inship, a sailor and two other men in gray, were clustered by the gangway. The shot had brought them all around; and although they might not have heard it, the two helmets in the plane also were turned. Swiftly one of Bland's dark guards started for Adams, while the other disappeared into the deck house.

Captain Jack sprang to the rail and waved wildly. "Go back!" he shouted. "Send help! Gaunt! The *Iris*!"

He had the sensation that men were running toward him from all directions, but he did not try to evade them. Hands cupped, he repeated raucously: "Go! Help! Pirates!"

A pistol cracked; a bullet whined.

"Go!" yelled Adams.

Something hit the back of his head. He grasped the rail to keep from falling and let out a last warning. Rough hands jerked him loose, hard fists thudded into his head and body as he mechanically tried to weave and counter. He heard two vicious slaps of steel on bone, but

he felt only one. Smiling, he sank down on the deck, atop some one who had been struck by accident.

ADAMS knew that he should be unconscious, but he was not. He was paralyzed. His mind was incapable of thought, but it recorded pictures faithfully. It floated a million miles away, detached, yet absorbing everything like a photographic lens.

His assailants let him be because their attention was riveted on the plane floating there so near. Up and down the rail half a dozen were staring at it, motionless, waiting. The speed boat was casting loose to roar at the silver bird in which two helmeted forms had not moved. Against the deck house lurked two of the omnipresent men in gray, each now holding a submachine gun.

Captain Jack's detached mind wanted to shout once more; his prone body could only writhe in nightmare. It seemed a million years had passed, instead of one scant minute. Then the plane's motor thundered, and its loafing propeller whirled into a transparent disk.

The launch returned the thunder. It darted out; the plane's pontoons pitched in a sudden glide. Sunlight danced on the low swell of the sea. And on the yacht's deck a bit of hell unleashed itself.

Two men in gray were at the rail.

"Stop 'em!" bellowed the master of the *Privateer*.

"Stop 'em!" echoed Wolf Brace, nearer Adams.

Machine guns clattered out a flame-streaked inferno. The silver plane swayed, its motor stuttered. A hooded head bobbed sickeningly.

"The floats, you fools! The floats!" screamed Geoffrey Bland.

The inferno settled to a steady crashing. Green water boiled into a lather of jetting spray beneath the plane's thin body. Its glide quickened into a jerk

that tilted it forward drunkenly. Its motor died, and it sagged back. The speed boat shot alongside and the firing ceased.

From far away Jack Adams watched a slim figure lean fearlessly from the plane's fore cockpit and climb back to the pilot's seat. Men from the speed boat pulled it down and swarmed up to lower an inert body. The plane's pontoons were almost out of sight.

The launch left a gleaming arc in the smooth sea as it shot back to its berth. Two men ran down the landing stairs; others gathered at their top. The shimmering plane rocked derelict, slowly sinking. And Captain Jack made a discovery.

His mind was not floating; it had returned. His sore body was not paralyzed; it would move. He was lying face down across the legs of a seaman who also was beginning to stir. Adams reached for the rail and pulled himself up into a crouch.

None noticed him. The group in the gangway parted to make way for a slender form in boots and riding breeches, leather coat and goggled helmet, that stormed up to Bland unerringly.

"I don't know who you are," cried a rich voice vibrant with outraged fury, "but you'll pay for this."

Captain Jack hauled himself upright. Dizzily staggering, he made his way along the rail. Wolf Brace, back turned, was the nearest to him, and from Brace's coat pocket hung a pistol butt. Nerving himself to one blind effort, Adams jerked at the gun.

He was still too weak and shaky. The pistol caught somehow in the pocket; his thumb missed the safety catch. Brace, jumping, hit him with elbow and fist. Adams' blank gaze met that of the slim aviator as he collapsed in complete unconsciousness.

Nevertheless he had realized that slim form was not a man.

VII.

ADAMS had an evil dream. He was on the schooner, and everything that had happened was happening again. Over and over he was going through the same ordeal—discovery he was trapped, Gaunt's appealing looks, a fight for freedom, sulphurous defeat, awakening. He was awakening now, though the same thing never happened to him twice.

Just as before, his head ached horribly, his sides hurt, but his brain was clear and his muscles had lost their numbness. He was lying bare to the waist on a stateroom bed in the prison suite. Two slim hands were bathing his head with something cool and invigorating; two heavier ones were exploring his many bruises.

Above him leaned a slender, shapely figure in riding breeches and tan shirt. He was looking directly into the face of a handsome girl, a classic face pale but composed, intent but unafraid. Deep blue eyes smiled into his, firm red lips parted.

"He's all right, dad," said a warm voice.

Behind the girl John Gaunt's haggard features smiled in relief.

"You're Sally Gaunt," said Adams. "I remember you."

"You were on the *Cymbal* one time we crossed," she said as frankly. "Dad's told me all you've done."

"Sally's told me all you did a while ago," said John Gaunt. "If Reg had been as quick as you in taking off——"

Captain Jack was embarrassed to find them holding his hands. He sat up. "How is Tarrel?" he asked quickly. His clasp closed hard on the girl's fingers. "By the lord, if they'd shot *you*——"

Sally Gaunt shrugged, but a spasm of rage and pain crossed her father's worn visage. Adams' own frown was black.

"They only creased his scalp," said Gaunt. "We saw to him first. He'll do. But damn it all——"

"No use!" Captain Jack grinned. "Who'd expect to find a bloomin' pirate on a private yacht? Now if you'll let me find a shirt——"

They went out. Adams dressed and joined them in the sitting room. His employer's son lounged on the divan, youthfully good-looking in the flannels he had worn under a flying suit. His spoiled, attractive features were sullen, and a white bandage encircled his dark hair.

"A fine mess you got us into, skipper," he said irritably.

"I?" said Captain Jack. "Who in thunder hired Johnson, anyhow?"

Reg Tarrel grimaced. He was not a bad sort; only too accustomed to doing as he pleased, unquestioned. "I did," he admitted. "Worse luck!"

"Then be thankful you're alive," said Adams grimly.

Ignoring the young man's scowl, he poured himself half a glass of whisky and drained it down. It had the desired effect. Renewed strength coursed in his veins. He was not surprised to find that it was himself, not Tarrel, that John Gaunt and his daughter watched.

He strode over to the wide sealed ports. Dusk had fallen, and the stars were out. The yacht was plunging into the southeast at top speed. Nearly two hours must have passed since he had made that abortive attempt to warn young Tarrel off. In that time Gaunt and Sally and too-assured Reg had had time to wear off the incredulous emotions that must have possessed them, whether of fury or of fear.

He turned to Gaunt. "We're having rotten luck," he said. "But I see some hope in this. They'll be scouring the whole sea when Reg doesn't return. What happened?"

Sally Gaunt tossed back her short honey-colored hair and explained as calmly as if she had been meeting spitting flame and stabbing death all her young life:

"We telephoned Mr. Tarrel when dad did not arrive last night. Between them he and Mr. Mortimer phoned all up and down the coast, until we heard red rockets had been seen off Amelia Island. They hired boats and planes and cars to look up and down the shore. Reg flew down to Jacksonville this morning to pick me up. We had a hunch everybody else was searching too near home; that a smuggling boat or something might have picked you up. We decided to look farther out to sea, especially for boats that might not have a wireless. Mr. Tarrell had been broadcasting a reward for the *Iris*' crew."

YOUNG TARREL, sullen, took up the story: "We came down and spoke two or three coasters. Then we sighted a suspicious-looking schooner ten or twelve miles from a big yacht. I was getting low on gas so I came down to borrow some before I hailed the schooner."

"You would run low on gas!" snapped Captain Jack. "Then nobody knows which way you went?"

"The governor knows I was looking for Mr. Gaunt," Tarrel defended.

"At least Jim will have a reason to send planes everywhere," John Gaunt declared.

"And at least I've found you, dad," Sally added happily.

The financier twisted his thin lips in a bitter smile. "And I wish to Heaven you hadn't, Sally."

Captain Jack read his glance. "Be thankful she's on this ship, not Brace's," he said curtly.

Gaunt shivered. Young Tarrel stared at them stupidly. Sally Gaunt, standing as fearless as a young flying nymph, pressed her father's hand.

"Captain Adams will get us out," she said encouragingly. "Won't you, skipper? I told dad, years ago, you looked just like a sailor should."

Adams grinned. "Did I?" Inwardly his pulse had skipped a beat. "I'll try." He frowned at Gaunt. "Has Bland been down?"

"Not since he brought Sally. And his men carried in you and Reg." Perspiration had appeared on the financier's forehead. "By Heaven, I'll kill that man!"

"In due time," said Adams. "I've underestimated him, Mr. Gaunt. I couldn't believe a business enmity could go so far. You were right; he's mad. When it comes to turning machine guns on a girl—— But we'll see to that later."

"What can we do?" said Gaunt.

"Take it easy. Stand by and pray for a break."

A clicking lock provided interruption. One of the swarthy men in gray slipped in with a ready pistol. A thin, saturnine ship's officer—Inship's mate—looked in and examined young Tarrel's bandage callously.

Leaving, he grinned at Adams. "As for you, you're hard as nails," he remarked.

"And a good thing, too," said Captain Jack.

Two Filipinos followed, serving dinner under the unmoving gun of Bland's guard.

"Let us eat, drink, and be merry," proclaimed Sally Gaunt. "For to-morrow we may die."

Young Tarrel scowled.

Captain Jack smiled. "Good girl! Mr. Gaunt, a toast to the first man aboard the ship who will earn five thousand dollars by helping us to shore."

They tried to drink the toast cheerfully, but neither guard nor steward smiled. The dinner passed like a hollow mockery. At last the steward took out their serving trays. The swarthy guard stood in a corner, vigilant, opaque eyes glittering when they fell on Sally Gaunt's young lissomeness.

And Geoffrey Bland came in.

VIII.

BLAND was debonair. Bland was mocking. Only John Gaunt realized that Bland also was deadly, sinister, probably insane. And only Captain Jack Adams sensed that Geoffrey Bland, underneath his mocking coolness, was much afraid.

Inside the door, Bland paused to study them coolly. Adams and Tarrel sat on the divan; Gaunt and Sally had armchairs. Bland's wild tawny eyes glowed on each in turn.

He walked over to Captain Jack. "Adams," he said, "I don't know why I don't have you thrown overboard. You're more trouble than a wild cat."

"You wouldn't be here to say that if I'd been able to get out Brace's gun," Adams retorted woodenly.

Bland's manner changed. He bared his teeth and wheeled on Tarrel. "And you, you fool," he remarked. "Why the devil did you have to come barging in?"

Whatever his mental capacity, machine guns had not convinced Reg Tarrel that he was not a rich man's privileged son. He leaped up. "Damn you!" he cried. "You'll swing for this when my father hears."

Bland's arms whipped out. Two blows to heart and jaw seated Reg on the divan—very hard. "Put the spoiled brat away," Bland barked, and his swarthy guard caught the youth by the collar and propelled him into a stateroom. Bland held a hand in a bulging pocket significantly while the stateroom door was locked.

Sally Gaunt, slim and pale, had darted up. "I know you now, Mr. Bland," she said fearlessly. "I told you you would pay for this!"

"Yes?" Bland smiled. "And suppose my men make *you* pay?"

Sally recoiled. Captain Jack felt his restored muscles swell, but he made no move. If any harm came to this brave

girl, he knew he could kill Geoff Bland with his bare hands.

Bland guessed his thought. "Damn you, Adams!" he said pleasantly. "Am I going to have to accumulate a boatload of dead men to make you realize I mean what I say? Get into that other stateroom,. You, too, my fetching Sally. Mr. Gaunt and I are going into conference here and now."

Adams waited.

Sally Gaunt gave their captor a look of angry loathing. "Come on, skipper," she said distantly. "Dad knows how to handle lunatics."

Captain Jack regretted her thrust when he heard Bland's chuckle. He went with her into the other stateroom. She slammed the door and turned to him softly.

"Here," she said, so near that her fragrant hair brushed his battered chin. "I don't know why I slipped this into my pocket this morning, but I did. I didn't dare try to use it until I'd talked to dad. He said to give it to you."

Into his palm she pressed a little .25-caliber automatic.

Adams smiled down into her courageous eyes. "You're a game kid," he whispered. "You keep it till I ask for it. And shoot any swine that touches you."

"I shall," said the girl simply, red lips compressed. She looked like a young and forward boy.

Suddenly Adams caught her hand. "Listen!"

None had noticed that the stateroom door, slammed too hard, had failed to latch. Now it stood open a bare crack, but enough for Adams and Sally to hear the two voices in the sitting room. Bland's was suave and mocking over an undertone of angry doubt; John Gaunt's cold and hard. Captain Jack and Sally Gaunt sat listening to that climax of a business feud unaware that they were hand in hand.

EVIDENTLY Bland had waited for his guard to leave the cabin—and for silence to create mental strain. Now he said silkily: "We've always hated each other, Gaunt. You've beaten me and beaten me, until it came to this. Do you believe now that I'll send you all to hell before I'll give up this revenge?"

"You mean," Gaunt said harshly, "that you've hated me since I had to break the 'Boy Wonder' of Wall Street to keep him from pirating my own mines. You're a speculator; I try to build. It was you who kept coming back at me, trying to buck my companies' solid growth. I told you no stock manipulator would ever get rich on the Gaunt name. Time after time I've beaten you. I will again."

"Will you?" sneered Bland.

Silence lay heavy in the sitting room.

"Will you?" Bland repeated. "I've waited years for this, Gaunt. I've kept track of your every movement. I know how the depression crippled you. I know how you've had to extend yourself to work up this Pelman Motors deal. A great thing, Gaunt, if you succeed in forming a new motor-and-machinery combine. Ruin, if you had to drop it here. Let Gaunt stock crash once, and your banks will have to sell you out to protect their own collateral. Am I right, John?"

"What of it?" said Gaunt.

"Only this," said Bland: "Your idiotic Tarrel has forced my hand. A little; a very tiny little. At nine o'clock to-morrow I radio my brokers to sell Gaunt stocks short—dump all they can. Ten points down, and your banks will have to sell. Everything you own is pledged to them, Gaunt. What then?"

"Try and see," rasped Gaunt.

"I know," said Bland. "To-morrow night I'll radio the New York papers you've been found dead at sea. Next day I can buy Gaunt stocks at my own price and have your empire to myself. Or I can buy up the Pelman stocks and

radio that you're alive and that the deal's been made. Which will you have, John?"

"What does it matter?" said Gaunt. "Jim Tarrel and my secretary, Mortimer, will run you down. Try it, Geoff. I defy you!"

"Shall I?" said Bland. A note of horrible menace rose in his tone. "Shall I, Gaunt?"

"Go ahead," said old John Gaunt, unmoved. "Jim Tarrel will know. Go ahead and make your play. You know, and I know, you've put your head in a noose. You know, and I know, you went too far to-day. They'll run you down like a common outlaw."

"Will they?" said Geoffrey Bland. There was an interval of silence, stealthy, foreboding. Bland's voice rose on a note which expressed contempt for every decency and honor: "Oh, no, Gaunt! We're starting a long voyage, you and I. But if they make me wary, I need only turn *all* of you over to Wolf Brace. He has a secret *cayo* on the Bahama Banks that's been his hideaway for years. You might be safe there; so might young Tarrel. But Adams would not arrive. And I gravely fear your handsome Sally would never leave."

Two chairs grated; one crashed over.

Bland exclaimed: "Back, you fool!"

A thud followed. Jack Adams, in the stateroom, was on his feet, eyes blazing, hand reaching for the door. If John Gaunt's iron control had given way, so had his.

Sally Gaunt, pale with anger, kept her head. She caught Adams by the arm. "No!" she whispered. "No! Not yet. He's mad, but the other would be worse. You must not attack him until we are free of *them*."

Captain Jack's taut figure yielded. "You're a better man than I am, Sally Gaunt," he muttered. "Easy does it—now. But Heaven help him—then."

He flung open the door and entered the sitting room.

IX.

ACROSS the pleasant cabin John Gaunt and Geoffrey Bland faced each other with murder in their interlocking gaze. Bland held a pistol leveled, his full lips drawn back until his features resembled a maniacal mask. Gaunt's massive head was thrust forward as if he was about to spring.

As a matter of fact, he had sprung already, in that one second of pure outrage. Bland, heavier and younger, had hurled him back with a blow upon the chest.

"Damn you," Bland was snarling, "don't you realize it makes no difference to me if you disappear forever?"

He whirled at their appearance. Sally, superbly calm, only stared at him with scornful hatred. Adams grinned coolly at the ominous tableau.

"Reduced to threatening women, are you, Bland?" he taunted. "Whom will you threaten when the coast guard comes searching for the plane? Mere sight of Brace will make them search the ship."

Bland's glower faded into his satirical suavity. "Brace won't be here, my friend. And if you annoy me too much, you won't be here, either. Remember what I owe you for this afternoon."

He waved his pistol at Gaunt, who stood white with repressed rage. "Gaunt, to-day should have shown you I mean business. You have until nine to-morrow to make your choice. Hell won't stop me, once I start either way."

Nonchalantly he stepped to the door. "If you're so clever, Adams, come on deck," he ordered.

Captain Jack restrained a frown. If this meant separation from the Gaunts it would be serious—unless he was given quarters less secure than the suite fitted up for a prison. Ironed below decks he would be helpless. Nevertheless he managed to smile reassurance at Gaunt and give the girl a warning nod.

He was ready to leap at any desperate chance as he followed Bland, but evidently Bland meant to give him none. The guard in gray, waiting in the corridor, fell in behind. Another sat in the lounge with a machine gun, commanding the stairs and doors to deck as well. A third prowled aimlessly about outside.

Adams went out into the night with a self-possession not altogether genuine. In the back of his mind lurked that terrifying thought of Sally Gaunt, alone on a vessel with a score of cutthroats committed to little less than open piracy. Through the dark he made out Brace's schooner, rejoined and now falling gradually behind, although its sails were set for added way.

Bland motioned him up the bridge stairs. A quartermaster was alone at the wheel. The guard remained behind as Bland and Adams passed on into a teak-and-mahogany chart room in which Wolf Brace and Captain Inship leaned over charts spread on a table. From the adjoining wireless room cracked an unending splatter of fast code. Urley stood in its doorway, relaying yellow slips.

Bland, consumed with hate and looking forward to a great stock-market coup, might hide his doubts as to the possible consequences of young Tarrel's disappearance, but his subordinates made less pretense. Inship was taciturn; Brace, swaying, glared through his green slits of eyes. Urley wore a new pallor, whether of fright or desperate resolve it was hard to say.

ADAMS stood unobtrusively in a corner, trying to catch what he could of that rattling code. Except for an oath from Brace they paid him no attention. Bland ran through a sheaf of the yellow slips under Inship's disapproving gaze and tossed them aside with a shrug.

"I don't like it, mister," said Inship. "Air will be full of planes to-morrow,

looking for that plane. They're sending out some coast-guard boats already."

"Bah!" said Bland. "They'll only ask us if we've seen anything."

"But suppose they get to thinking of foul play?"

"Who'd suspect a private yacht?"

Wolf Brace leaned across the table. "Yeah?" he rumbled. "I don't like the coast guard foolin' round my craft, whether they got anything on me or not. And don't think you're going to cruise forever without bein' asked questions, if you do what I hear you plan. Give me the damn prisoners and clear your skirts and they'll be right here"—he placed a huge thumb on the chart—"a month from now."

"Perhaps, Wolf. Perhaps."

Adams noticed that Urley stared at Brace.

Inship was glum. "I still say we should have faked some messages," he said stubbornly.

"And tip them off by sending the opposite to-morrow?" demanded Bland. "But the plane does complicate matters. I think we can risk direction-finders and what-not for one report to throw them off the scent. Adams!"

"Yes," said Captain Jack.

"What did they call your friend at the Tarrel place?"

"He has a name, hasn't he?" Captain Jack grinned.

Bland swore. "Don't stall. They couldn't have it known that he was there; they had to keep their deal quiet until they got through buying stocks. What did they call him?"

"The servants called him Mr. Jones."

"Good!" said Bland. He snatched a sheet of paper and scrawled rapidly. "How's this?" he asked Inship, and read aloud:

"This goes to Tarrel: *Iris* crew and plane passengers safe on private yawl due Nassau in two days. Plane abandoned out of gas. Mr. Jones asks advise Mortimer return New York. Have

promised yawl safe-conduct. Mr. Jones says no alarm. Signaling this for transmission from yacht *Privateer*, hurrying New York under quarantine, subject completion generator repairs. Will communicate further later. Adams, ~~master~~ *Iris.*"

Inship cocked his head. "Might do. The smuggler inference would explain it. No danger in one sending. But if you want to send something else to-morrow——"

"If we send something else, to-morrow," snapped Bland, "our guests will be at Brace's hideaway."

"Hell's bells," roared Brace, "then let me get going. I don't like this hang-in' round."

"Later, Brace. Have this sent, Urley. We'll have a spot of dinner and see what the reaction is. We have the night to cruise together, Wolf, if it turns out there's nothing near."

He came over and took Adams by the arm. "As for you, my friend, don't forget the gun in your back when you go below. If I expected you to be here to-morrow I'd throw you in the hold."

"Yes?" said Adams. "Bland, if you put that girl on Brace's ship I'll kill you like I would a dog. And if I were you, Bland, I'd watch Wolf, anyhow."

"I do," said Bland. "Damn you, go!"

X.

CAPTAIN JACK returned to the sitting room with vast relief. The captives would be together a few hours, or longer, and at least a search for them had started. Whether Bland's message could halt it was another matter. Anyway, they had most of the night to try to evolve some scheme.

Gaunt and Reg Tarrel sat alone, Gaunt scribbling calculations bitterly, young Tarrel working himself into a sullen anger with high balls. Gaunt sprang up at Adams' crisp salute, but

Captain Jack held a finger to his lips until the lock had turned.

"What's up?" asked Gaunt. "Sally's lying down."

The girl denied the statement by appearing from a stateroom. Adams was acutely conscious that relief glowed in her fine eyes, too. "Thank goodness, you're back!" she said unashamedly. "What is it?"

"News, of a sort," said Adams. He mixed himself a drink and sat with her on the divan while he related what he had picked up from the wireless code and in the chart room.

Sally sighed.

Gaunt bit his lip. His haggard face had lighted for the first time in hours, but its harassed lines were deep again. "At any rate, they'll be looking out to sea—if they keep on looking."

Reg Tarrel got unsteadily to his feet, dark eyes red beneath the white bandage. "They'll look," he proclaimed. "They can't do this to us."

Captain Jack favored him with a cold smile. "You've been machine-gunned and knocked about for nothing, then," he reminded him. "They do anything they please, and if you don't believe it, feel your scalp. If I were you I'd go to bed, son."

Tarrel, scowling, did go to bed.

The girl reached to touch Adams' hand. "Skipper, do you think they'd really put us on the schooner? To be hidden on some desert island?"

"I'm afraid so, if there's much fuss about the disappearance of the plane."

"I—feared that," Gaunt said. "Sally, I'd rather die than have you here."

Sally, smiling, shook her honey-colored head. Adams said nothing. He fully expected to die, himself, before the girl reached any Bahaman pirate's secret cayo.

"What can we do?" asked Gaunt.

"Go to bed," said Captain Jack.

They did, at last. Gaunt had to bunk with young Tarrel; Adams chose the

divan. The three shook hands as they said good night.

Adams retrieved the blank-loaded revolver from the cushions, slipped it in his waistband, turned out all the lights but one, and settled down to think. Young Tarrel might fume in bravado, Sally might shake her pretty head, and old John Gaunt might ignore the probability of staggering losses, but the net was closing in.

Desperate men did desperate things, and if Geoffrey Bland had not been desperate before, he might be soon. Not to mention the greater uncertainty of Wolf Brace. Brace had let himself in for no small danger for what he must now consider the smallest pay. Let him get Gaunt in his clutches, and there probably would be another plot. Brace, in fact, might plan to get Gaunt in his clutches, anyhow, and half of Bland's renegade crew might be only too glad to help him.

That was the situation. And what he could do about it, Captain Jack could not think. Bland and his lieutenants and bodyguards—ex-gangsters, no doubt, he had picked up to watch a crew of scum Inship had gathered—would be up most of the night, waiting for intelligence by radio, if that would help. A special prison suite was not likely to be closely guarded. But that was little consolation to a man locked in.

Moodily he surveyed the room once more. Ports could not be opened without a drill. Deck and walls were steel beneath their floor and paneling. The door was steel, fitted with a special lock. Whoever owned the *Privateer* had planned it well for Bland's arrangements.

Then he noticed the push button of a steward's bell and said "Ah!"

Stewards should have keys. A yacht should have service stairs, somewhere, between sleeping quarters on one deck and lounging quarters on another. If the bell worked and was answered—

He pressed the button twice, held it down for good measure. He was in a mood to tackle steward and guard together, if they came. If he could lay hands on some cartridges, or get to that wireless room—

Nobody came. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. The bell was disconnected. In the morning, Adams reflected, he could enlist Gaunt and Sally's little automatic and try the steward dodge at breakfast. If they were there for breakfast!

ANY SAFE hideaway Brace had among the multitudinous Bahama keys would have to be approached by secret channel, and any channel, to be generally unknown, would be shallow. When Bland made up his mind, the prisoners might be transferred to schooner or speed launch at any time. Brace would want to make the most of the night, for he would have a perilous day ahead. Perhaps doubly perilous for any unwilling passengers.

Captain Jack lay down on the divan ruefully. So far as he could see he was checkmated at the very start. There was still a faint, a very faint, chance that some one might come in during the night; he could only pray for luck. He made sure the revolver lay snug inside his belt. Fitfully he dozed.

It was after ten when a click sounded at the door. Adams felt, rather than heard, the door open and close. The light he had extinguished last clicked on. A man in rumpled serge looked at him over a revolver barrel. The man was Urley, one-time football hero, one-time one of John Gaunt's promising young men, one-time convict for robbing his own benefactor.

"Get Gaunt," said Urley, in a low, hoarse tone. "I'll save him—and her—if he wants to make a deal."

Adams sat up yawning. "Get him yourself," he replied.

"And have you jump me from be-

hind? Quick, you fool! Make one pass, and I'll shoot you dead."

"And let Bland know you sneaked in here?"

Smiling lazily, he walked up to the muscular young man.

Perspiration gleamed on Urley's face as he waved his gun. "Damn you, stay back!"

Captain Jack halted so near that the muzzle touched his body. "The trouble with you," he observed, "is that you think too much. You don't know what to do when anybody fails to cower."

With the same smile he jerked out his empty weapon and shoved it against Urley's stomach. "Go ahead and shoot," he invited. "We'll both go down."

XI.

URLEY could not take his glance from Adams' ice-cold, magnetic eyes. He wet his lips with his tongue. "Your gun's not loaded," he said weakly.

"Only with blanks," Captain Jack admitted; "but blazing wads can raise the devil with a man's insides. Come on, son. Give me your pistol or let's shoot."

He knew already he had won. He had feared Urley might fire at once from sheer nervous shock, but it seemed even Urley's reflexes were too slow. Trembling, Urley lowered his weapon. He was not a coward, but he had not dabbled before in quick death.

"All right," he surrendered. "I'll show you this is on the square. Get Gaunt, before Bland misses me."

"Bland won't miss you," said Adams.

He took the intruder's revolver and laid it on a table carelessly. Praise Heaven, it was a .38! Coolly he extracted a handful of cartridges from Urley's pockets and heaped them beside the two guns.

"Damn you, hurry!" gasped Urley, and clenched his fists.

"I'm in charge here, son. What can you do for Gaunt?"

"Get him off of here in Brace's speed boat within an hour. If he'll let bygones be bygones he can name his own reward. I've had enough of this."

"With Mr. Wolf following behind to make sure the reward is big enough?" Adams grinned. "You'd double-cross your own mother, you yellow dog! Who tipped off Brace that Gaunt was a millionaire, anyhow?"

Urley glowered from bloodshot eyes. "Damn you!" he said. He leaped for the table and snatched up a gun.

Adams, leaping faster, hit him solidly behind the ear.

Stepping over the inert body, he summoned Gaunt. The financier came out in shirt and trousers, leaving young Reg Tarrel sitting up stupidly in bed.

"Get some sheets and help me tie this man," said Adams. "We've had a break at last."

He called to Sally and young Tarrel to dress at once. While they trussed up Urley he told Gaunt of the double traitor's offer.

"Probably a stall to get you in Brace's hands," he explained. "He and Brace both felt Bland was cheating them. Unless he'd worked up nerve to double-cross them both and hold you up on his own account. The point is, I didn't care to be left alone. And whatever he could do, we can."

One pistol he gave to Gaunt, with half the cartridges. Sally, bright-eyed, had the little automatic she was not to use except for very last resort. Young Tarrel, sullen, had to content himself with Urley's blackjack.

Most important of all, Urley had half a dozen keys. Captain Jack kept them himself. "This may be touch and go," he warned. "There may be hell to pay by dawn. Do as I say, and, above all, be still. You especially, Reg."

He opened the door cautiously. The corridor was dark save for the light that shone down the main stairs and apparently unguarded. He ventured in that

direction until he spied the legs of a man sitting in the lounge. It was unlikely Urley had come to them that way.

He retreated, examining the corridor doors. From their spacing he inferred the guest quarters included two suites and half a dozen separate staterooms. He chose a narrow door and tried it. It opened.

He flashed Urley's torch into a small square space that contained a steep, narrow flight of stairs and a dumb-waiter. Between them another door opened into a steward's tiny cabin with two berths. The stairs were dark, the cabin empty.

Captain Jack tried Urley's keys until he found two that fitted. Then he raced back to the prison suite and led his companions to the service pantry, locking every door behind them.

"Wait here," he whispered. "No light. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Sally Gaunt pressed his hand and murmured "Luck!" as he started up the narrow stairs. No light showed beneath a narrow door at the top. Pistol in hand, he tried the keys until one clicked. He listened; all seemed quiet. He stepped out, draped his handkerchief over the flashlight, and flicked it on a moment.

He was in a larger service pantry in the deck house. Three swinging doors in as many walls interested him less than another that opened onto the deck. Fleeting he wondered where the steward was, and decided Urley had passed a bribe. He slipped into the night on his rubber soles.

ALL THE after part of the *Privateer* was in darkness, but radiance streamed from the ports of the lounge and captain's quarters below the bridge. Shadowy forms were grouped at the rail of the foredeck, and an officer stood on the high bridge walk. Captain Jack made his way aft.

Under the dim stars the after deck was empty and deserted. He prowled

across. The yacht had slowed its pace materially; the landing stairs were down. Of the schooner there was no sign, unless its masthead lights winked among the lower stars, but Brace's speed launch should be alongside. Captain Jack would have given a good deal to know if it had returned to the schooner and come back again.

Returning, he climbed the steps at the end of the deck house. Atop the low superstructure was a promenade that passed for a boat deck, broken only by the colored-glass skylights of the dining saloon and lounge until it ended at the chart house behind the bridge. For the moment Adams' only thought was to get to the wireless room there, but blind fate would have to be his guide.

He had been prepared, at first, to let the whole crew stand by and shoot at him if he could get one message into the air. But if Wolf Brace was treacherously inclined, Adams preferred to keep his life.

He reconnoitered from the head of the stairs and crept forward. Lights glowed from the bridge structure, but two gigs, a cutter and a gas launch in their cradles, provided shelter of a sort. He wormed his way past a dark skylight to an illumined one and caught distant voices.

Adams crouched. Besides the officer there was a man in gray upon the bridge, revealed in a momentary gleam, and he held some dark object in his two hands. But the voices were below. A brighter triangle showed where a pane in the lounge skylight had been broken and not replaced. Risking the watchers on the bridge, Captain Jack crawled over to the skylight.

Bland, Brace, and Inship sat in the lounge, the same tension apparent in their taut figures. A Filipino replenished high balls on a stand, a man in gray was bringing wireless slips. Another man in gray cradled a machine gun at the head of the stairs. And Wolf Brace,

leaning his gigantic torso on his huge arms, refused to take his gaze from an ironical and debonair Geoffrey Bland whose handsome cheeks were wet.

"Show-down?" Captain Jack asked himself. He could identify their voices, but between the ripple of waves and the tread of the watch it was difficult to catch every word. What he could not hear he imagined.

He guessed their news, filched out of the air, was none too good. Probably the faked radiogram to James F. Tarrel had not halted a coast-guard search for the missing *Sirius*. Perhaps James Tarrel and Mortimer, Gaunt's secretary, had refused to swallow the story of rescue by a smuggling yawl. Certainly Wolf Brace was not good-natured now.

Adams heard his roar distinctly:

"Dammit, Bland, make up your mind! Twenty per cent of the loot, and I'll keep 'em on the *cayo* till doomsday. Or let the coast guard lay you like the crazy nut you are. I'm shoving off."

Bland answered: "I've told you. Put all but two of your men aboard here, take my guards and the prisoners, and I'll pay fifty thousand for your hide-away. Otherwise, shove off. I don't trust you with a baby's toy."

Adams saw Brace rear up his bulk; heard Brace growl: "Then to hell with you!" He saw Brace glance at Inship, saw the yacht's master shake his head; heard Brace bellow: "Hell's bells!"

As if it was a signal, hell's bells rang. A shot rang out on the foredeck; on the bridge the man in gray screamed and dropped his gun. In the lounge a knife slithered sparkling from a door and took the other gunner in the arm. Then Bland and Inship and the remaining guard were charging with spitting automatics, and Brace was gone.

And Captain Jack Adams was running for more than his life, back to the superstructure stairs, around to the service pantry.

XII.

FORWARD, pandemonium reigned—shots, shouts, bedlam, as Wolf Brace's ex-hijacking crew stormed at Bland's faithful men. From the bridge Adams detected a machine-gun burst suspiciously short-lived; from the lounge another. Rifles answered.

He reached the pantry door. A seaman in white—and Bland's wore blue—charged at him with flashing gun. Captain Jack's revolver cracked, and the man went down. Swiftly Adams darted in, found the stairs, locked the upper door, and descended in two bounds.

Gaunt had switched on the light. His countenance was deadly, although it had been years since he had fought with anything save money. Sally looked as brave as any soldier in her boots and breeches; young Tarrel's mouth might be sullen, but his eyes were hopeful.

"You raise that row?" he demanded.

"Brace jumped Bland," said Adams curtly. He thrust his revolver into young Tarrel's hand. "I've got to trust you, Reg. You and Gaunt watch that door above. Don't move unless they break it down, then shoot like hell. Don't waste a shot. Sally, stand here by the door. I'm going out."

Gunfire crackled in the corridor from the head of the stairs. Other gunfire crackled on the deck. Some one, quick-witted, had turned out the lights in the lounge, but the wide passageway was dimly illuminated from Bland's own lighted suite, across from the prison chambers.

Lower limbs of two men in gray, lying where the upper steps of the main stairs spread into a T leading to the deck-house doors, were visible below. To their natural embankment several seamen and a Filipino were rushing mattresses from the guest staterooms. Among them Captain Inship was barking orders.

From Bland's suite rushed another Filipino, loaded with another submachine gun and two rifles. Inship, stockily phlegmatic, seized them and joined the defenders on the stairs. No one noticed Captain Jack when he crossed the hall and quickly unlocked the prison door.

Urley lay trussed upon the divan. Adams cut the improvised thongs with Urley's own knife.

"Brace is attacking Bland," he stated. "Which are you for?"

Without waiting for an answer he hauled Urley up and propelled him over to the other suite. Geoffrey Bland, darkly debonair in this hour of stress, was handing guns and ammunition from his spare stateroom.

"This man offered us a deal to go with him a while ago," snapped Adams. "I'd watch him, Bland."

"Damn you, Urley, report to Inship!" commanded Bland, unmoved. "Adams, how in hell did you get out? Give me your parole not to attack us, and I'll arm you if you like."

"We won't turn on you—yet," said Captain Jack. "But hurry! I've got Gaunt and Tarrel watching the service stairs with Urley's pistol."

Bland started. "Damnation!" he exclaimed. "Here! Oh, Pete!"

Into Adams' arms he thrust an automatic rifle and pair of revolvers, with full cartridge belts. The man in gray who had a knife-torn arm looked up from his bandaging and was ordered to hurry. Captain Jack raced for the pantry stairs.

He was in the nick of time. Crashes resounded on the upper door; Gaunt and young Tarrel, stony-faced, aimed their pistols at it from the foot of the stairs. From the main stairs at the end of the corridor came a furious fusillade. And the service stairway door gave way, just as Adams pushed his late fellow prisoners aside.

He loosed a blast from the automatic

rifle into the black oblong that opened. A sailor in white tumbled down the steps, blood gushing from his neck. Another was hauled back by his feet. A hail of bullets thudded into floor and walls. Blasting his way, Captain Jack ran up the stairs and found his fire unanswered.

He was holding the top unchallenged when the bandaged man in gray joined him, swinging a Tommy gun.

"I'll take it," he growled.

Adams sprang down. One of Bland's seamen paused on the steps to roll the gory body out of the way. The Gaunts and Tarrel had gone into the corridor, pale with horror.

Adams patted Sally's shoulder. "I'll get you out of here."

She nodded assurance. The din of shots had diminished. Captain Jack made quick calculations.

The speed boat no doubt was tied at the landing stairs. Brace probably had brought nearly his full crew from the schooner, and right now every man was occupied. Bland might be preferable to Brace, but the open sea would be preferable to either.

HE CHOSE a stateroom door and tried Urley's keys. The cabin was unused. He crossed it in the near dark and tried the port. It was not battered; noiselessly he opened it. The landing stairs were out of reach, but almost directly below the speed launch rocked, apparently unattended.

Adams beckoned. "Mr. Gaunt, you and Sally twist up some sheets or blankets and tie them into a rope. Keep the door shut and use the flashlight; be sure it doesn't shine out through this port. Reg, you stand by in the corridor. We've got to work fast."

The force in the hall had settled down to a state of siege. Two men in gray and two sailors lay amid a pile of mattresses on the stairs, sniping spasmodically. Another seaman guarded a nar-

row open door which evidently led below. One Filipino, carrying ammunition, kept in touch with the men at the service pantry; the other was making a secondary barricade of furniture and mattresses back from the main stairway.

Bland, eyes wild, mouth bitter, was supervising.

Captain Jack walked up to him. "How many men have you, Bland?"

"What you see. That rat Urley bolted. Three in the engine room; Inship's trying to reach them. Four on the bridge, counting mate and operator—if they're alive. I suppose the rest were surprised and locked up forward; probably some joined Brace. He couldn't have brought more than nine. Urley, damn him, may have made some recruits!"

"I warned you. What do you expect to do?"

"Slaughter the swine. Charge 'em when we see how the odds lie."

An ominous drum of musketry broke out anew on deck. In the midst of it a louder explosion sounded, then another.

"They've improvised grenades!" rasped Bland.

Adams frowned.

The men on the upper steps were firing steadily with rifles and short machine-gun bursts. Acrid fumes eddied in the corridor. On the stairs there was a warning shout, a crashing volley, a reverberation of red flame and yellow vapor. For an instant that whole end of the passageway disappeared in the roaring blast.

Bland and Adams sprang for it together. Through the smoke half a dozen white figures hurtled. Two automatic rifles split the acrid screen with a sustained flaring clatter. Two of the figures pitched headlong, the others fled. From the disrupted pile of mattresses three bleeding men dragged themselves.

Bland, swearing frightfully, helped them into his second barricade and

rallied his scared stewards. The bomb could have done more damage. Bullets rained into the splintered staircase. Muffled shots rattled from below, whence Inship reappeared with a burly engineer. Bland seemed everywhere, firing, directing first aid, cheering his men on.

Captain Jack would have liked to hear Inship's report. For a mere tricky gambler, driven desperate by repulse and hate, Geoffrey Bland was living up to the pirate's code, and Adams wished him luck. But Bland or Brace made little difference now.

He hurried down the hall and with Tarrel slipped into the stateroom they had appropriated. John Gaunt and Sally, pale but calm, were ready with their thick knotted rope. Adams locked the door, made one end of the line of bedding fast, lowered the other from the porthole. Whispering instructions, he wriggled through and let himself down.

His life hung, not by a rope, but by a mere thread, he knew. If he was seen from deck he could only drop and try to swim. The steady crackle of shots was his chief hope that they might gain the boat undiscovered.

The launch was not quite within reach. Adams pushed himself from the ship's side with one foot and managed to hook the other over a gunwale. In a trice he was in the stern cockpit and jerking his cloth ladder for signal.

Young Tarrel followed through the port, clung with one hand to take the rifle from Gaunt and pass it down, and dropped beside Adams. Captain Jack caught Sally in his arms as she came next. Gaunt, anything but old, required no help.

They were free.

Young Tarrel, in the bow, cast off. The sea was rougher, the yacht so motionless they could not wait to start the motors. Adams delayed until Reg came back. One would have to stand guard at this crucial moment.

Tarrel busied himself with the quick dexterity of a racing pilot. In the starlight a white form leaned from the gangway. Captain Jack whipped up his rifle and fired just as the speedster's engines thundered.

The launch careened in a fast turn. From the dark yacht rose angry bellows. Pistols and rifles flashed orange from the deck, sharp against more muffled shots. Adams returned a spray from the automatic rifle until the motor boat was at full speed.

XIII.

THE LAUNCH fled into the night; fled eagerly from that insane pirate ship where a madman fought a desperado for a fortune and a captive no longer there. The *Privateer* was soon lost to view; even its running lights were out. In the big fore cockpit John Gaunt held Sally against his shoulder. Captain Jack joined them with a sigh of sheer relief.

"Sally told you we'd find a way, Mr. Gaunt." He smiled.

Sally held out a white hand. In the dark her handsome face was but a blur. Adams squeezed the hand and John Gaunt said:

"If we make it, skipper, you can name your own reward."

Captain Jack rejoined young Tarrel. "I can take it now, Reg. You're an expert on these things. How far can we go?"

Reg Tarrel, long since forgetful of his bandaged head, gave up the wheel and crouched above the motors. "It's good for thirty knots an hour or more," he replied. He returned less jubilant. "Adams, the damn thing is nearly out of gas."

Adams stifled a gasp. He felt as if some one had struck him in the pit of the stomach. After all this! "The devil!" he exclaimed.

Spinning the wheel, he oriented himself in relation to the yacht and the prob-

able position of Brace's schooner. To return to the *Privateer* was out of the question. Besides, it was practically in Brace's hands already.

"We'll have to take Wolf's ship," he decided grimly. "Reg, take over. Nor'-nor'west until we sight it. It must be near."

Regretfully he explained the new necessity to John Gaunt.

Sally's eyes sparkled under the stars. "Take his ship?" she echoed. "Oh, if we could sink them both! Why, Captain—Jack—you're defeating them almost by yourself!"

"But you're the one who brought the climax on," Adams reminded her. And made out the schooner's lights, where it pitched under bare spars.

He had no great fear about the schooner. Brace, surreptitiously, had taken too many men to the yacht. They thundered up to the schooner without concealment, and the sailor who made the launch fast had no suspicion.

None, at least, until Captain Jack had leaped on deck and jammed a revolver into the man's ribs. John Gaunt, acting like an old hand, performed a similar office for the helmsman in the semi-armored wheelhouse that doubtless had served Brace's nefarious operations well.

Adams wasted no time. A brief search left no doubt that the two men were alone. Remorselessly he bundled them into the dinghy and cast them off. To Sally he turned over the untidy main cabin; to Gaunt and Tarrel he gave curt orders:

"Mr. Gaunt, you're the watch. Look out for lights and hold this wheel just as it is—into the swell—until I come. Reg, find the gas and fill the launch's tanks, then see what you can get out of the engine of this tub. I'd like to trap Brace, if we can. I'll look for evidence and arms."

Sally helped him in the latter. Without difficulty they found a wireless receiving set, but no transmitter. The

fo'c's'le deck house was a blank, but a trapdoor in a closet off the cabin, apparently leading to a lazaret, gave into a steel-lined arsenal in the very stern. Most of its guns had been removed, but there was a variety of ammunition, and an old Hotchkiss machine gun complete with tripod.

JACK ADAMS seized the Hotchkiss joyfully. Submachine guns he discounted except in pistol range, but this veteran was fit for another war. He mounted it on the after-deck house as a mere precaution, although he could find but one belt of shells.

Reg had the launch towing astern and had gone below. Captain Jack joined Gaunt in the wheelhouse and Sally brought them drinks.

Adams explained: "As soon as we have steering way we'll put about. It may be working up a blow. I'd like to take the schooner as far as we can, if only to maroon Brace. The minute we sight the yacht, of course, we'll have to take to the speed boat and run for it. The *Privateer* can make three knots to this tub's two."

"Unless Brace put the yacht's engines out of commission before he knew we were gone," suggested haggard John Gaunt. "He wouldn't have wanted to leave Bland able to pursue."

"That's why I'm risking all this time," said Captain Jack. "If the *Privateer's* disabled I'd like to stand by until help comes and lay them by the heels for good. Bland's operator must have sent an S O S without orders when lead began to fly."

Reg Tarrel emerged from the companion, face as white as the bandage on his dark head. "Adams!" he cried. "The damned engine can't be made to go. There's no magneto."

Adams started. "The devil!" he exclaimed. They had spent most of a precious hour here without putting another league between themselves and the

pirate crews. Under his breath he swore.

"Do you suppose Brace hid it, or took it along? To make sure his own men couldn't make off with his cursed craft? He's a trustful rat, that swab! Damnation, it must be here! Let's look."

He remembered the precious time lost and reconsidered. "No; let it go. Pull up the launch. We'll run for it while we can. Damn Brace!"

Sally Gaunt, flinging back her shapely head, said: "Listen!"

They all heard. Somewhere to starboard there was a steady *put-put* in the dark. It ceased abruptly.

"Brace?" gasped John Gaunt. He was suddenly very old and very tired.

"Found us gone and came after us already," snapped Adams. "The blighter knew the launch was low on gas and the schooner where he left it. Bland must have given up sooner than I thought he would."

The motor boat, if it was the *Privateer's*, was suspiciously quiet. Tarrel had the schooner's smuggling speedster alongside.

"Reg, go forward with the automatic rifle," Adams ordered. "After all, this may be help."

Clambering upon the after house, he shouted: "Boat ahoy!"

There was no answer. Night glasses he had found in Brace's cabin revealed a dark spot in the faintly phosphorescent swells, still several hundred yards away.

Captain Jack cupped his hands. "Ahoy, the boat! Stand to before I fire!"

"Fire and be damned!" returned a distant hail.

Orange jets flowered in the cold and purple night; rifle bullets whined through the shrouds.

Mr. Wolf Brace, having risked open attack on a private yacht whose crew outnumbered his more desperate band, did not intend to let a half-million-dollar ransom get away.

XIV.

ADAMS crouched by the venerable Hotchkiss and thanked Heaven for his forethought. Even one belt of shells would help, if he could hold to short bursts.

"Sally," he called, "stand by the launch and keep your head down. Gaunt, watch the other side. Reg, be ready to come fast."

The approaching boat was still silent, rowing, but there was enough reflection of starbeams on the choppy water to show Adams its shadowy blur. He swung the cumbersome machine gun and touched the trigger gently. The gun crashed out a searing *rat-a-tat*. He knelt and aimed more carefully and unloosed another blast.

The same rifle answered him; the boat's *put-put* was resumed, all attempt at concealment abandoned.

Across the waves came a hoarse bel- low: "Boarders away! Boarders awa-a-y!"

From the bow young Tarrel's automatic rifle clattered.

Gaunt shouted: "Adams! Two other boats! Rowing hard!"

The roaring Hotchkiss jammed on the last of its deadly fodder. Captain Jack snatched up the carbine he had taken from Brace's arsenal and leaped down to the deck. "Reg! Gaunt! Sally! Quick! Abandon ship."

Wolf's strategy was clear to him. Brace had known the speed boat would make for the schooner to get gas, or make for land and soon run out of fuel. He had got out the *Privateer's* boats and followed, trusting to Adams' seaman's instinct to keep the fugitives on the schooner, if they went there. Towing the other boats behind the gas launch, he had cast them off to attack the schooner from several quarters, hoping to make it a clean surprise.

And, probably, Brace had forbidden any of his men to fire, lest one unlucky

shot rob him of the rich ransom dangling within his reach. In that lay Adams' hope.

Gaunt and Sally were already near; Reg came running. The *chug-chug* was drawing close, but the rifle, significantly, had ceased to flash. From the opposite side, oars splashed audibly. Breathlessly the four tumbled into the speedster.

Tarrel sprang for the wheel; Adams pushed Sally and her father down below the sides with scant ceremony. The motor thundered as he began to fire with his carbine.

Somewhere forward a boat had bumped. The launch hurtled straight ahead, passing so near the yacht's slower, bulkier craft that Captain Jack could distinguish a big figure braced in its bow.

"Damn you, lie to!" screamed Brace.

Adams emptied the carbine at close range, and they were in the clear. Shouts and curses echoed from behind. Brace, in blind fury, pumped lead after them; some of his men, forgetting orders, joined in. Bullets whipped the sea and thudded into the speedster's stern. And young Tarrel grunted.

"Hit?" snapped Captain Jack. He had crawled back in time to hear, through the engine's steady purr:

"Nicked," said Reg. "Nothing. I'll do."

"Good lad!"

Young Tarrel, spoiled and careless, improved under stress. He was proving a man to-night.

"Go up and rest," Adams ordered, and took the wheel.

He throttled the motor down a bit and thought. Nothing could touch them now. Brace's tender had the heels of anything within a hundred miles. But its speed was gained at the expense of sturdiness, and they might be in for a bit of blow. The wind had been freshening imperceptibly all night; the ocean's swells were growing into waves. A

hint of light gleamed in the eastern sky; he had lost all count of time.

John Gaunt came back. "Adams," he said wearily, "you must be made of iron. You seem able to meet anything. How do you do it? Ships, boats, machine guns, men—is there nothing you don't know?"

"Nearly nothing, maybe, about the sea," Captain Jack said absently. "My father was a navy man, and I've knocked about a bit. Chinese navy, South American gunboats, tropical tramping."

"And why are you working for Tarrel?"

"Thought I'd better try to settle down while I was young enough. And berths became scarce straight off."

Gaunt coughed. Adams stared straight ahead, struggling with the decision he had to make. If they could have kept the cursed schooner——

Gradually his nerves transmitted a different sensation. Captain Jack came to himself with a start. His feet were wet.

He glanced down, frowned, spoke to Gaunt quietly: "We're leaking. Too much. Look in the lockers for something to bail with."

Alert again, he sniffed. More than water was leaking; he caught the odor of gasoline. Gaunt returned with a bucket and went to work while Adams investigated.

"Look here," he said at length. "Brace took the last trick, after all. We'll soon have our hands full, bailing, to keep afloat, and do well to hold any speed. And if one of us forgets and strikes a match, it will be too bad. If help doesn't turn up with daylight, Wolf will have us yet."

SALLY'S dim form leaned over the engine hoods. "I heard that, Jack. But if we took the schooner, couldn't we take the yacht?"

"By Heaven!" said Adams. He had been thinking of last resorts.

"And be at Bland's mercy again?" exclaimed John Gaunt.

"There are four of us now, and armed," said Adams. "And Brace likely took all the fight out of your friend. But it's disabled; could we hold the *Privateer*?"

"Have to," said Sally cheerfully, and Reg Tarrel laughed.

"Then hold hard," said Adams. "I'm damned if I'm going to shuttle back and forth all morning!"

He wheeled the boat over and gave it full throttle. Gaunt bailed. The schooner had been lost to view, but far to south and east a single red pin point glowed. And light streaks were appearing in the skies.

Gray dawn was slowly rolling back the darkness of the sea when they made out the yacht, a red smudge still bright upon its deck. And none too soon, thought Adams, for their trim craft was wallowing at less than ten knots, and liquid sloshed about his ankles. Heedless alike of discovery or resistance, he looked to their arms while Reg steered for the side. Landing stairs were still down; the handsome yacht rocked as sorrowfully as a derelict.

It seemed an age before they reached the stairs; another age before Adams was in the gangway, rifle at the alert and two revolvers in his belt. He took one look, recoiled, and turned to Gaunt.

"Get Sally out of this," he muttered. "Reg, for Heaven's sake get up these stairs!"

The *Privateer*, so sleek and rakish, was a very charnel ship. Half a dozen grotesque bodies dotted the white deck, some in blue, some in white, some in gray. Bloodstains showed where other men had crawled away. Deck-house ports were broken and its sides bullet-scarred; the upper bridge structure was pock-marked like a Swiss cheese.

Two pale seamen, attempting to remove bodies, stared at Adams stupidly. He strode to the bridge steps, and in-

ship's saturnine mate, a tourniquet showing through a split trouser leg, limped to meet him.

Of Geoffrey Bland, mad author of the carnage, there was no sign.

XV.

"I'VE COME aboard, mister," said Adams coolly. "Any objection?"

"Who cares now?"

Adams shrugged. "Inship? Bland?"

The mate jerked a thumb toward the entrance to the lounge. Captain Jack called to young Tarrel to keep watch and went inside. They need have no fear here.

A younger officer with bandaged arm and a frightened Filipino steward were binding up half a dozen wounded men who had been dragged into the lounge. In a corner lay Inship, gray in death. On a divan, Geoffrey Bland was propped up, his upper body swathed in cloth.

His features were gray, but at sight of Adams his tawny eyes gleamed through the ghastly dawn. "Adams?" he croaked.

Captain Jack stood over him. "We came back, Bland. Did your operator send out a call for help?"

Even in his weakness Bland was able to smile mockingly. "How should I know? He's dead. Probably he tried. Where's Brace?"

"On his schooner. Close behind. What happened?"

Bland's voice shook. "They had us—with those bombs. We got up the service stairs—tried to charge. Half my men—had joined him. No lights—no engines—no chance. He took the boats—money in my safe—when he found you gone."

Despite himself, Captain Jack felt a twinge of pity. Mad or crooked, Geoffrey Bland had fought as well as he knew how. Facing death, helpless, Bland was still wickedly debonair.

"I tried to tell you, Bland. Now

Brace may come back. Any men here I can trust?"

"Who can anybody trust?" sneered Bland. "Maybe some arms—below."

Adams jumped down the torn and splintered stairs. It was gruesomely plain there was no spirit, no fighting spark, left on the whole ship. Except, perhaps, that which lingered in Bland's dying gaze. In the lower-deck corridor another sailor passed him unseeing.

In Bland's wrecked suite Adams found a submachine gun intact, a chest of assorted ammunition. He ran up the service stairs, around to the dining saloon. Sally Gaunt smiled at him bravely. He commanded her to stay and sent Gaunt out as guard.

The sky was glimmering with red and orange. Thus far, Reg reported, nothing was in sight.

Adams said simply: "It's a toss-up. If the operator flashed an S O S, we're safe. If not, we've got to fight off Brace. For the last time, by Heaven!"

Cursing, he drove the few seamen at their work where the limping mate could not. He went up to the scarred bridge, and looked into the wireless room. The equipment was so smashed it would take hours to effect even rudimentary repairs. Gloomy, he returned to the lounge that threatened to become a morgue.

Bland beckoned with his eyes. "Damn you, Adams, you've won alone! Do me one favor?" The mocking voice was low and pained.

Adams nodded. "Get Brace! And Urley!" Bland croaked. "I was a fool to hire either. A fool, anyhow, I guess. Tell Gaunt I knew—before I died."

He sank back. And from the deck young Tarrel yelled a summons.

Captain Jack rushed to join him. The schooner was in sight, coming under full power.

It was nearly full daylight, although there was as yet no sun. In the distant sea haze Brace's schooner, all sail set,

loomed like a ghost—a ghost that stood for ruin and for death.

THE *PRIVATEER'S* scared survivors scurried away. The thin, saturnine mate cursed, but he asked for a rifle. Adams stationed him with Gaunt and young Tarrel in the superstructure. The Filipino brought whisky; they waited, tense.

For himself, Captain Jack was too tired to care. Brace, with the relentless persistency of Satan, would not let go until he died. Twice they had evaded him, against the most discouraging of luck—and to what end? They had to stand him off once more.

Hollow-eyed above an empty smile, he leaned in the lounge entrance and watched the ghost schooner sheer nearer. Across the big lounge, Bland's dying eyes still burned.

A mile, half a mile, a cable's length. On the schooner's deck not a figure showed itself. Slowly Adams raised the rifle he had retained with the Tommy gun. He took a long aim and fired into a wheelhouse-shutter slit. The schooner yawed. Two men darted from the after house. Others rose above the bulwarks and raked the yacht's sides with rifle fire.

Adams did not move. The schooner came on. Another sheer, and it was full alongside. Captain Jack, unmoved, shot a sniper from its rigging.

Brace, disdainful of so feeble a force, confident no man of Bland's crew would have the heart to resist, meant to try to board.

Grapnels attached to ropes sailed over the yacht's rail from the schooner lying below. The *Privateer* was ghastly quiet as it pitched, but Brace's desperadoes raised a bedlam. Volleys crashed up to cover their assault.

In the deck house there were three rifles to pick off the boarders as they appeared. Trusting them for a last stand, Captain Jack ran crouching across

the deck. If a Thompson gun could equal a Hotchkiss at close range, now was its chance.

He dropped half prone above the knots of snarling men who swarmed at the hooked lines. Lead sang about his ears, thrown mostly at random. On elbow rest he leveled his rapid-firer and let it go full blast.

At these close quarters, and from above, it was a very blast of hell. Men reeled and fell; wood splintered; canvas, taken aback, flapped foolishly. A swinging boom slapped the yacht's quarter, knocking a sailor from the schooner's rail. And Adams kept on raining death.

Pistols, rifles, another submachine, spat flame at him below, but of boarders there was no trace. He heard a shout, "Plane ho!" more shouts, and raucous curses. A last sulphurous volley, and the schooner had sheered off.

Adams let go the rest of his magazine and dropped his gun drunkenly. Twice whining fire had touched his skin; something had ripped flame into his arm. But Brace was gone, shaking a great fist in the schooner's stern, and roaring overhead was a big flying boat that bore the insignia of the United States coast guard.

Captain Jack went limp.

HIS NEXT awakening was not accompanied by any dream. Unless it was a dream to find Sally Gaunt bathing his sore head again. He lay in the deserted dining saloon. A coast-guard officer was talking to John Gaunt and young Reg Tarrel.

From pure habit Adams tried to sit up. Sally pressed him back, held his hand tight. His other arm was bandaged; so was his side.

"Hush!" said Sally.

"I'm all right." Captain Jack smiled. "But I promised your father I'd land him in Jacksonville."

"You will," said Sally. Her fine eyes were blurred.

"Bland?"

"Dead." The girl shivered. "I never—never——"

"We can forget it now."

Gaunt came over; he was haggard, weary, but his granite features were bright. "We're safe, skipper. They can have us under way in a few hours. A patrol boat's near—but I'm afraid not near enough to catch Brace. You've saved some precious things to-day."

"I'm glad!"

Gaunt sat on the improvised cot with Sally. "We'll talk this over later. But I want to tell you now that Jim Tarrel and I control a shipping line. You get

a command next month. After that, whatever you want to make it. I need men like you."

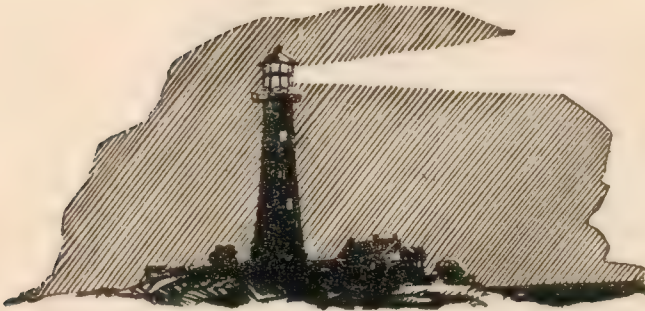
"Thanks!" said Captain Jack. His head was spinning, but the girl's touch was cool and soothing. "I'll do my best. But don't think you owe me——"

"Owe?" said Gaunt. "That's not all. I told you you could name your own reward."

Adams glanced at Sally. Her warm, calm gaze had not left his face once. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, she bent her honey-colored head.

"I shall," said Captain Jack. "Later. I mean—I hope—*soon*."

Sally's fingers tightened reassuringly in his hand.





M U R D E R MILL

*A gripping
story
of the
North*

by James
P.
Olsen

*Death was in the air
—riding the very
logs, hovering over
the whole mill!*

*Illustrated by
J. Maturo*

MENACE marked the opening of the mill. A gray day, with a keening wind surging the waters of Puget Sound against the big booms forming the mill pond. The whine of the cut-off saw seemed a funereal dirge; the song of the shingle saws, the rip of trimmers, an ode to death. Even the thump of the cedar bolts, dropping into the conveyor from the cut-off saw downstairs, was like clods falling upon a coffin—clods that closed a grave.

They should have been happy. The mill was running again after a shut-down of six months' duration. Yet every man of them felt the intangible pull at their stomachs. Shingle weavers and packers; the cut-off man below; the swamper—all felt it.

The clack of ratchets on the shingle machines seemed mocking; the whine of saws rasped nerves; the clank of the conveyor was the rattle of ghost chains in a place of the haunted and the damned.

And then Death came riding into the mill; came astraddle of a great cedar log. Sleek and dripping, the mighty stick came out of the water and was conveyed slowly toward the huge cut-off saw that would cut it into bolts for the shingle weavers above.

Gus Carlson eyed the log as it slipped almost awesomely toward him. A querulous man, Gus; but big-hearted. Gus was a stockholder. The Cedo Shingle Mill was coöperative. A half dozen of the men who worked in it held stock in it. Gus had a young wife. He needed work. But, as he somberly watched the big cedar stick come up to his saw, he felt no elation.

The carriage took the log. Slowly, slowly, Gus let it forward. The great saw pinged sharply, then settled to a shrill, hungry cry. Salt spray whipped from the wet wood. The saw ate through the butt. The bolt dropped into

the conveyor, and the carriage came back.

Death, skull-faced and unrelenting, still rode astride the log.

Gus Carlson shot the carriage ahead again. He cursed half-heartedly at his shakiness. The premonition of disaster gripped him harder. Again the saw's savage wail——

It was like the crackling of a gun; like the wail of a shell from a field-piece; like the piercing whistle of a restless soul. A madly whirling wafer of tooth-edged, heavy steel, now broken into half a hundred pieces and flashing through the air. A beam cracked as a segment of the saw slashed into it. A ragged, gaping hole in the sheet-iron side of the cut-off room marked the trail of another piece.

Upstairs, shingle machines went silent. Men yelled, then came rushing down. Gel Bardine, also a stockholder, a sort of straw boss, was in the lead. Tall, a bit stooped, his thin face very white under his black hair, Bardine gasped and stopped stock-still—so suddenly that Bill Dowe bumped hard against him.

Dowe was another stockholder; a shingle weaver. Dust from his machine clung to him. Red-cedar dust, fragrant, and now like blood as sweat broke out and streaked the dust on his shrewd, frugal face.

"My — good — Lord!" Bardine croaked.

He raced for the boiler room. Dowe, the others pressing close back to him, looked after Bardine, a faint, not-to-be-defined something in his eyes. The mill whistle, then, screamed out in beseeching blasts—an emergency call, a death signal. The town of Tugmonds came to life. Men and women raced down the hill toward the water front; men and women, white-faced, prayerful, hoping the victim was not some kin of theirs.

Bardine came back to the cut-off

room. He turned his head as he stepped around the crumpled, gruesomely stained thing that had been Gus Carlson—until that heavy piece of flying saw caught him fully in the chest.

Bill Dowe ran his fingers through his gray hair. His voice, in the terrible silence, sounded almost too calm. He said: "I guess Gus ran his carriage in too fast and pinched the saw."

"Pinched—nothing!" Bardine thundered. "Look! Look at that!" He was pointing. "Somebody has driven railroad spikes into the log. That's what caused the saw to break. That's how Gus Carlson was—murdered!"

"Murdered? But why should anybody murder Gus?" Dowe asked.

He got no answer. A doctor ran in. They had to struggle, hold back the poor, screaming young thing who cried so sickeningly—Gus Carlson's young wife.

THE MILL ran only in the day. At night the men who held stock in it took turns at the watching trick. It saved money. Not that Bill Dowe was so hard pressed. His round, frugal face was an accurate indication. He had saved his money; invested it wisely and well. But he was going on watch at midnight. Until that dead hour, Charlie Breen punched the clocks on the rounds through the ghostly, dark old pile.

It was early. Dowe didn't walk down the main street of the little town. He skirted it and stopped at a small house that looked over the Sound toward Kingston on the far opposite shore—Gus Carlson's house. Mae Carlson let him in.

Dowe looked around. A seedy old trunk was packed and roped; a cheap straw suitcase lay open on a chair. To the shingle weaver's spoken question, the pale-faced young woman nodded and said:

"I'm going to my people, beyond Bel-

lingham. I couldn't stand it here." She fought back tears that welled up in her misery-bright eyes.

"I hear," Dowe mumbled, "you sold the stock Gus owned."

"I almost gave it away," she sobbed. "But I had to have money."

"A hundred shares, wasn't it?" He made it more a statement than a question.

She nodded again.

"Are you positive you sold *all* of it?" he pressed. "Didn't hold back any of it?"

"Why, no. I sold it all."

"To some buyer? Likely, a firm of lawyers?"

"Yes. But I promised not to tell the name of the firm."

"That's all right," Dowe assured her.

He left then. He seemed rather satisfied; like a man who is sure, after checking up, that a deal has gone his way.

At the mill office, little Charlie Breen, the bookkeeper, got up nervously when Bill Dowe came in. Charlie laughed half hysterically. He looked at the clock.

"You're two hours early, Dowe," he said. "But I'm damned glad you came. I need some one to chin with. Dowe, damn it, I feel so rotten, so empty—in here." He put a thin hand on his stomach. "And when I go through the mill, down past the cut-off room, I have to fight myself. My back crawls, and my legs jerk and try to pull me away from there on a run."

He mopped his damp face with a handkerchief. A sudden gust of rain splattered the windowpane.

Charlie jerked out: "Now it's got to start raining!" he said. "As if I wasn't blue enough!"

"Forget it," Dowe advised. He pulled a bottle from his pocket. "Have a small one." He took the bottle back and had a small one himself.

Idly, it seemed, he asked: "Charlie, has any one ever tried to buy your

stock? You hold a hundred and fifty shares, don't you?"

"So they tried to buy yours, too, huh?" Charlie answered.

Dowe shrugged. It might have meant a lot or a little, that shrug.

"I wouldn't sell, though," Charlie went on. "Right now, it's about a tenth of what it's worth. Besides, if we all sold a bit here and there, some outside bunch might get control of the mill. And business is picking up. Nope! I wouldn't sell. Did you?"

"No," Dowe replied, eyes on the floor. "But I wouldn't mind buying a little."

Again, he seemed satisfied; like a man who knows some one is doing as he should; carrying out orders as advised.

The door opened again. "Hap" Jenkins came in on a gust of rain-carrying wind. A big man, Hap Jenkins, an ex-logger; now the night marshal in Tugmonds.

"Just wanted to be sure ever'thing's O. K.," he explained, grinning a bit sheepishly.

"Why shouldn't it be?" Bill Dowe demanded.

"Oh," Hap shrugged broad shoulders, "I don't know. But since they've got to callin' this the Murder Mill, I sorta get the creeps about it. Huh! Murder! Cops from the county seat couldn't see it. Just bad luck that a log came in with a spike in it. Me—I don't think it was accidental bad luck."

Dowe favored Hap with a covert, shrewd look. "You never know," he dryly replied.

Hap started to speak, changed his mind. He left abruptly.

Dowe looked at the clock. "Quarter to eleven." He yawned. "Guess I'll go up to Irie's and get a cup of coffee. Be back before midnight."

"I got to make another round at eleven," Charlie quavered. "I wish it was time for you to go on now. I feel sicklike, Dowe. I—I don't know. I

keep thinking of my mother. She'll wait up until I come home to-night."

"Forget it," Dowe advised from the doorway.

He plunged out into the rain. He looked back through the window. Charlie was getting into his slicker. He picked up his time clock and swung it over his shoulder.

"Gus wouldn't sell *his* stock, either," Dowe grunted.

SOME ONE had awakened Bardine and the others. Lights gleamed sullenly through the fog-wisped, rainy night—rather, early morning. Running so close to the mill office that there was hardly car clearance were the railroad tracks. Switch lights, ominous red and sickish green, marked the lines of rail.

The group stood just to one side of a main-line passenger track. Bardine, looking as though he had not slept, turned away, his breath coming in wheezing gasps. Hap Jenkins laid a slicker over the mangled form that, a few hours before, had been Charlie Breen.

"No use stayin' out here," Hap mumbled.

He went toward the mill office. The rest followed.

Inside, Hap turned to Bill Dowe. "I got to hear your story, Dowe," he said. "You was here with Charlie when I come out close to eleven o'clock."

Dowe nodded slowly. "I left, right after you did, Hap. Charlie was getting ready to make the rounds. I gave him a drink. I walked out. Went to Irie's for a cup of coffee."

The owner of the all-night lunch up the hill, who'd closed up and joined this solemn group, coughed. "I—I don't mean nothing, Dowe," he said placatingly. "But—well, Dowe, you didn't get to my place until about ten minutes after 'leven. I know, because you come in just as I was telling a feller what time the last ferry went to Ludlow."

Bill Dowe seemed unperturbed, as though prepared for this. "Yeah," he confirmed placidly. "That's so. I got to thinking of this and that and walked down the tracks a piece; came back to town from the south."

"Like hell!"

It was Bardine. He leaned and pointed a shaking finger at the shingle weaver. "You waited until Charlie was ready to make a round through the mill. You fuddled him with drinks, then went out and waited. When he came out, you likely knocked him in the head and then dumped him on the railroad tracks."

All vestige of color drained from Dowe's rather tolerant face. It was a hard, bleak face now; the eyes were crow's-footed as he pulled his lids close together.

"Why," he demanded slowly, harshly, "should I kill Charlie?"

"Why should you kill Carlson—put those spikes in the log?" Bardine croaked. "I don't know. There's some reason."

"It seems," Dowe volunteered, "to be about the only thing you haven't got figured out."

"Lay off! Stop it!" Hap Jenkins bawled irritably. He turned to Dowe again. "Why didn't you report Charlie missing when you came back to take over the watch?"

Dowe hesitated. Then he said: "Wish I had. But, well, Charlie was so jittery, I thought he'd beat it. I didn't want to make a report that would get him laughed at. I forgot it, then, until his mother came hunting him. Then I looked through the mill and the yards."

"Charlie wouldn't go out on the tracks. No business to. None of the time stations are near it," Bardine said. "You killed him, Dowe. By Heaven, you killed him and put him on the track so the train would cover up how it was done."

"The coroner will have to carry this on. Sorry, Dowe! You'll have to stay in this office until he comes." Hap gave the order with evident distaste. The others in the office looked this way and that; anywhere but at Bill Dowe.

Silence, save for lash of the Sound and beat of the rain. A ghostly dawn came slowly. At last the coroner and the sheriff arrived. It took them an hour to decide that they could not hold Bill Dowe. There was no evidence. He'd taken a walk. True. Charlie Breen had last been seen with Dowe. If Bill Dowe *had* killed Charlie, the train had removed all signs.

There were some who were glad; others who thought Bill Dowe should be locked behind the bars. The sheriff himself left the impression that his search for evidence was surely not at an end. He warned Bill Dowe not to leave the town.

"And me," Gel Bardine snarled as the group broke up, "I'm going to prove you did this. Damn you, Dowe, you're going to pay!"

Dowe looked at Bardine, through him. He said nothing.

Out on the track, men were carrying a grim basket to a black dead-wagon. Up in town, Charlie Breen's widowed, now childless, mother, sobbed for her son—Charlie Breen, who'd felt sickish and afraid.

THE MILL was closed to-day. Tooting tugs towed sections of logs to the mill. To-morrow, the saws would whine once more, and men would feel death's breath softly blown upon their necks. Menace would fill them with its forebodings, and they would eye each other with suspicion and misgiving. Especially would they eye Bill Dowe.

Dowe knew it. But he gave no sign. Now, in the early part of a gusty morning, he mounted worn steps and knocked on the door of the mother of Charlie Breen.

"I wanted to know," he informed the careworn woman, once he was inside the house, "about the stock in the mill that Charlie owned."

If he was hurt by the look of wondering suspicion she gave him, he gave no sign. She was thinking, he knew, that here stood the man who'd killed her son.

"You sold it, didn't you?" Dowe pressed.

"I sold it," she replied wearily. "I had to. I have to live."

"Sold *all* of it?" he persisted.

"Yes—all," she echoed.

"You sold it to a firm of lawyers?"

"Why, yes! But I'm not to say who."

"No need to," he assured her.

He left—after first looking up and down the street as though to be certain his exit was not observed. Again, as in the instance when he'd left Mae Carlson, he seemed a man satisfied that things were going as it was intended they should go.

He got his little car, then, and drove to the main street. He didn't go into the pool hall and beer parlor where most of the men held forth. Gel Bardine's car was parked across and down from the pool hall. Dowe went into the drug store on the corner and sat at the fountain. He could see Bardine's car from there.

Hank Chalmers, the druggist, came up, his perpetual grin of good nature somehow not affecting Bill Dowe right now.

"I've got a new brand of gin, Bill," Hank began.

Bill Dowe didn't seem to hear. He slid off the stool and got himself quickly out of the door.

"Hangover, I'll bet," Hank told himself good-naturedly.

But it wasn't that. Bardine, in his best clothes, had got into his car and driven off. He'd had on his best clothes when Dowe saw him go into the pool hall that morning. That meant that Bar-

dine was going either to Seattle or Everett.

When Bardine swung off the Sound-Loop pavement onto the main highway, he turned toward Seattle. Bill Dowe followed Bardine's sedan. There was in Dowe's eyes a light that was hard, shrewd, calculating.

He trailed Bardine into the city, and when Bardine parked his car and walked up Pike Street, Dowe was still behind him. Bardine went into a small office building. Dowe gave him time to get an elevator, then went into the building lobby. He read the building register idly, in the manner of one who knows certain persons in the place, but desires to kill time inconspicuously; and as though he fiercely wondered if Bardine, who'd sworn to prove that he, Dowe, had killed Carlson and Breen, had gone to see those persons. There were several firms of attorneys at law listed on the board.

Head down against the rain, hands deep in his pockets, Dowe tramped back to where he'd parked his car. Usually, window displays interested him no end. To-day he did not offer them a glance. He drove rapidly back to Tugmonds, his mood the abstracted air of the man who thinks deeply—and makes plans.

GHOUL'S whine of saws; ghost-chain clack of conveyor chains. Men were touchy. They jumped at any sudden loud sound. A shingle weaver pulled back from his machine, flinging a spray of red as he swung his hand around. The trimmer saw had taken two finger tips. The man was thinking of something else—of murder in the mill. The saw had been quick to seize the chance.

Bardine walked up and down past the long row of machines. He watched Bill Dowe. Bill Dowe, out of the corners of his eyes, looked frostily at Bardine whenever Bardine came near to him.

To one side of Dowe's saw, a large

opening yawned in the floor. Through this hole, the swamper swept dust and trimmings. Below, in the throat of that chute, a trapdoor had been laid back, exposing a huge blower fan. It whirled to bits the trimmings and blew the dust along to the boiler room, where the boiler fires consumed it as fuel.

It would be an awful death to fall down that opening. Now, more than ever, men skirted wide around it. The swamper stood back and poked his broom far ahead of him when shoving sweepings down that trap.

Bardine eyed the hole; looked at Bill Dowe's back, then went around. He took the steps that led down past the blower box toward the fireroom. He was back within a few minutes. Dowe, squinting into the cedar dust, had watched him go below stairs; saw him come up.

The bench behind the shingle weaver was laden with the big blocks—shingle bolts. Now, as Bardine walked slowly near, Dowe turned, grunted as he lifted a heavy bolt, and turned back toward his machine—turned, just as Bardine started by him.

Bardine yelled. It was a cry of terror such as none of them would ever forget. Men leaped and shrieked. Bill Dowe stood, the block of cedar in his straining arms, and stared vacantly at the open place in the littered floor. Bardine had vanished down that hole.

Saws, whistling to a halt; belts *slap-slapping* as power was cut off. And then, they heard Bardine call for help—Bardine, whom no man had thought ever to see alive again.

"Give me a hand," he called.

They rushed forward. Eager hands reached down toward him, and they hauled him up. Bardine was cool. He seemed unshaken by the ordeal. He looked at Bill Dowe; and Bill Dowe stared shrewdly, calculatingly, back at him.

"I don't know how that trapdoor over

the blower got closed," Bardine said significantly. "But I do know, if it hadn't got closed, I'd have been mincemeat right now."

Nobody spoke.

Bardine continued to stare at Bill Dowe. His lips curled and he jeered: "Getting afraid I'll learn the truth, Dowe?"

Dowe shrugged. "For a man as brave as you seem to be—not being nervous after such a happening—that shouldn't be a bother," he answered slowly.

The mill whistle shrieked. Bardine, a grim look on his face, turned away. Fellow workers edged around Dowe; edged, and looked at that hole in the floor. But for a near miracle, Bardine—Ugh! Maybe it had been an accident. Maybe! Bill Dowe was too close to too many accidents of this sort of late.

IT WAS RAINY that night. Bardine was to go on watch until midnight. Bill Dowe would take it from then on. Dowe went slowly down the street, leaning into the wind. He went into the pool hall and had a glass of beer, thoughtfully turning the glass and making wet rings on the top of the bar.

Hap Jenkins, the marshal, came in. "I hear," he vouchsafed almost too lightly, "Bardine almost had a bad accident to-day."

"Uh-huh!" Dowe nodded. "I talked to Mattern, the fireman, after quitting time. And I've had offers."

Cryptic talk, this. But Hap nodded, his face a mask, his eyes riveted to Dowe's face.

"You'd better be careful. Don't go too far," the marshal advised.

His voice carried a heavy note of warning. He moved off.

Dowe made an impatient motion with his glass. His elbow hit something.

It was Gel Bardine. What metamorphosis, this? Bardine almost was as

affable. He began without preamble: "Dowe, maybe I was a little hasty to-day. Maybe I've been hasty all along. I don't think, now, you aimed to bump me into that waste chute."

Bill Dowe opened his mouth to speak. Closed it, then, without saying a word. He merely nodded.

"But I've got an idea, Dowe," Bardine continued, his voice a husky whisper. "I've got an idea we can straighten out all of this business. I'm asking you to help me. First, because it'll clear you of suspicion; second, because you're due to take over the watch from me to-night."

"Sounds fair. Thanks. What is it?" Dowe seemed struggling to suppress a sardonic note that faintly inflected his voice.

"Simply, this: I've an idea that some one is going to lay for me in the mill to-night. It may be only a hunch; maybe, though, it's a strange warning feeling—like Carlson and Breen had. I want you to show up at ten o'clock. Don't let a soul know you're coming. Hide in the mill. Don't let any one see you. When I come through, watch me. If any one makes a play—— You understand?"

"Trying to," Dowe mumbled, his lips thoughtfully pursed. At last he nodded. "Ten o'clock," he said.

He watched Bardine pick up his electric lantern, button his slicker and go out.

"Hmmmnn!" Dowe muttered. His lips were twisted crookedly.

Outside, Bardine hurried down the street. He ducked into Irie's lunch place. Hap Jenkins sat sipping a cup of coffee at the counter. Bardine talked low, fast. Hap put down the heavy cup and fished for a cigarette.

"You're sure he'll make a play?" he asked slowly.

"I could see it in his eyes," Bardine stated. "He thinks it's a clear chance. He's worried and afraid, I tell you."

"I'll be there, then," Hap advised.

Bardine went on toward the mill. Ten minutes passed. Bill Dowe came into Irie's. He sat on the stool Bardine had recently vacated. He looked at Hap. As though they hadn't seen each other recently, they nodded to each other.

Down the counter, a man arose. He walked wide around Bill Dowe. Bill Dowe was becoming a pariah in Tugmonds—a killer too smart for the police. They felt sure he was a murderer; but it takes evidence for some juries to convict nowadays.

BARDINE stood in the rain outside the mill office. Hap Jenkins was there beside him. It was ten o'clock. Bardine lowered his voice, as though fearful Bill Dowe, in the mill across the yards, would hear.

"Do as I say," Bardine insisted. "I'll be watching for it. If he tries to get me, I'll be ready. Follow a little way behind me, and we'll get him in the act."

The marshal reluctantly agreed. He stood by the office until the dim light of Bardine's flash showed he was mounting the outside steps up into the mill. Hap, then, leaped forward. He ran rapidly across the yard. As he ran, he drew his gun. When Bardine disappeared inside the mill, his footsteps hollow on the floor, Hap Jenkins crept quietly along behind; closer than Bardine had bargained for.

Bardine flashed his light this way and that. "Dowe!" he whispered. "Dowe, come out a minute; I want to talk to you."

"Here!" Dowe's voice came from behind a bench piled high with bundled shingles.

Bardine went swiftly toward the sound of the voice. He came around the end of the bench. Something gleamed in his free right hand as his light went out. Bill Dowe sprang to-

ward him, swinging a length of heavy board down hard.

Bardine groaned. The lick of the board sounded sickeningly again. The sound of a body falling limply to the floor; the sound of Hap Jenkins rushing that way. Hap snapped on his own light. He shifted gun and light to the same hand, fished for handcuffs and held them out.

"Here, Dowe," Hap said. "Snap them on him. He'll yell the more for being chained up when he comes out of that lick on his egg."

Bill Dowe nodded. He jerked back Bardine's slicker, took a heavy hammer from beneath it. "He was going to drop this, after he shot me, and claim I jumped him with it," Dowe reasoned.

"That's pretty plain," Hap agreed. "Plain, too, he aimed to shoot you. With me here behind him—but not as far behind as he believed—he could say we set a trap for you and got you. It would be very nice—if it had worked."

"And he would have bought my stock for nothing," Dowe went on, still squatting beside the unconscious man. "With what he had, it would've given him control of the mill. I knew, when those shyster lawyers made me an offer, my turn was next. And he aimed to make it look like *I* was jumping *him*. Only, he didn't know I'd checked up. Even followed him to Seattle when he went to see those lawyers last time."

"He was smart," Hap admitted.

"Like closing the trap over the fan, bumping me, and falling down the waste chute to-day," Dowe pointed out. "The fireman saw him close the door, like I told you."

"He'd have got the stock, the mill control, got away with killing you, Carlson, and Breen," Hap admitted, "only, I knew you was with me, talking, the night Breen was killed. They thought you walked—or alibied you did—before you got coffee at Irie's."

On the floor, Bardine stirred. He rolled, groaned, sat up. "Hap!" he yelled.

His full senses came rushing back then. He blinked into the strong glare of the marshal's flashlamp; became aware of the steel cuffs on his wrists then, and looked at Hap Jenkins.

"What's—what's it mean?" Bardine quavered. He knew. They could tell he knew he was hooked by the self-conviction his voice contained.

"Hap, what's it mean?" Bardine again wheezed.

"Come on, killer," Hap grunted, jerking Bardine to his feet. "The judge'll tell you what murder means—but it'll be too late to do *you* any good."

Bardine was moaning brokenly when Hap Jenkins led him out into the rainy night. Bill Dowe sighed, picked up the time clock, and started the midnight watch at Murder Mill.



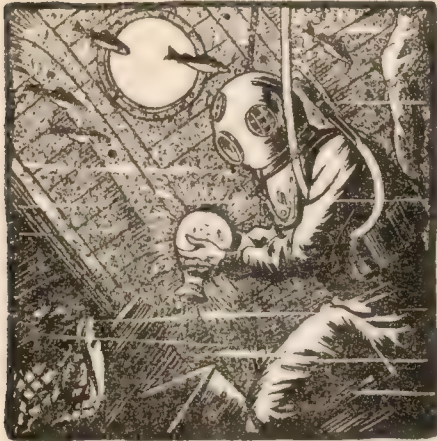
THE SHORT SHORT STORY CORNER

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It glowed with the lambency of a jewel.

\$50⁰⁰ Prize *Story for September* **The T'ang Vase**

by
**Frederic
William
Fowle**

AYE, SIR! Many's the tricks in navigatin' these waters, Mr. Carmody. An' since losin' the *Kanaka Pearler* an' your brother an' blame near my own life on Suba Reef, I ain't trustin' nobody with the wheel." Svenson shook his massive head sorrowfully. "Best pardner ever—Bill. Terrible loss—personal an' financial."

"Right! Rotten luck!"

Carmody knocked his pipe ashes into the soapy lather of their wake. He was a well-knit man of forty-odd, his immaculate linen more suggestive of a

yacht than a pearling lugger; yet he was one of those itinerant Englishmen perfectly at home anywhere.

"Rather ghoulish business, this—what? Only alleviation is, one knows that if it were I lying down, instead of Willie, the old chap would be up to the same thing I'm up to."

Svenson signaled his black boy to trim sail. "That chink stuff," he grunted, "ain't worth real tin?"

Carmody smiled his slow smile. "What was the value of the best pearl you ever found?"

Svenson was cautious. "One brought five hundred quid—away back," he added hastily.

"In my collection at home is an incense bowl of the Ming dynasty that I wouldn't trade for half a dozen such pearls."

Svenson's jaw sagged.

"You see," Carmody continued, "for years it was touch and go between Willie and me which of us should obtain the better collection of *chinoiserie*. Nothing acrimonious about it; fraternal rivalry—nothing more—but fearfully keen, you understand."

"Judas!" muttered Svenson. "D'ye mean to say there's people'd pay that much for an old china pot?"

"I'll say more."

Carmody refilled his pipe and carefully tamped it. The breeze, freshening, heeled the lugger far over and dotted the turquoise of the sea with cottony plumes.

"The coloring of the vase I have in mind would approximate the blue of the water off there—T'ang period. I saw it once, and, like a fool, didn't grab it. Spent the next two years trailing it all over the Orient. Well, six months ago I stopped by Li Yuen's place in Sidney and learned that he'd sold the T'ang vase a few weeks before to William Carmody for five thousand pounds."

Svenson's pale-gray eyes bulged.

"Willie never sent this T'ang vase home," Carmody added. "He couldn't have sold it; never sold anything. Only one answer: it went down with the *Kanaka Pearler*."

A DAY later they hove to in quiet water off Suba Reef. Standing in his diving suit at the stern of the lugger, Svenson said: "'Member, Saka; thirty a minute."

The black boy lowered the ponderous helmet over his head, twirled the screws home. Svenson waved to Carmody and slowly descended the ladder. It was

eleven o'clock; the sun would be good for two hours.

Carmody had wondered at his confidence that he could spot the old *Kanaka Pearler* within twenty minutes.

Svenson had had a crazy notion to say: "Know where she foundered? Man, *didn't I pick the spot!*" Bad—that. Too much booze. Booze bad for diving, too.

A baby shark swam straight toward him, tapped his helmet, flicked away. He dropped through a shoal of iridescent fingerlings suspended in the brilliant misty green, then, without a jar, touched a coral-and-sand bottom at ten fathoms. He walked toward the towering wall of Suba Reef glimmering palely ahead. Somewhere along here——

"Damn that Saka! Pumpin' too fast again." He jerked savagely on the rope.

Svenson was still furious with himself. He'd got the pearl, sure—and overlooked something worth maybe ten times as much. Half-wit! Bungler! It was enough to make a corpse laugh—enough to make Bill Carmody himself laugh—Bill Carmody, gentleman pearler, adventurer, and collector of Chinese jugs, lying down here somewhere in the *Kanaka Pearler's* cabin with a shark knife through his heart.

He had walked but twenty yards when he descried the old lugger grounded deep in the sand and canting far over, and pushed toward it. The sloping after deck was treacherous; he sucked in his breath as one of his weighted feet broke through the rotten planking. He entered that hatch in a crouching position, head erect, one hand on the steps, one against the bulkhead.

The cabin was murky; a lone beam of light filtered through a porthole.

A chill smote him. Dimly he could see an amorphous shape pinned to the tilted bulkhead by the long stiletto-like blade of a shark knife. The shape stirred with a slight movement of the water. It had once been Bill Carmody.

Svenson swore nervously and groped for the drawers under what had been Bill Carmody's bunk. He pulled out the top one, ran his hands through it—an unrecognizable mess. Then the next drawer.

Something swathed in layers and layers of cloth—and amazingly buoyant. It almost evaded his fingers and floated upward. Carefully he carried the vase, mouth inverted, to the light. There was air inside; should he allow it to escape at this depth, the concussion of the water might shatter the fragile porcelain. He marveled that it had withstood the pressure.

As he rotated it under the porthole, the vase glowed with the lambency of a jewel, generated a column of blue fire.

"Judas!" breathed Svenson. Within his trembling grasp was a life of king-like ease—an ocean of Scotch whisky and—

Hugging the vase he made toward the hatchway with infinite care, was half through it when a rude jerk snapped back his helmet. The air hose!

Like a thing alive, the T'ang vase, still inverted, slipped from his fingers and ballooned toward the surface.

SVENSON snarled his disgust. Not so much at his clumsiness with the vase—Saka and Carmody would retrieve it when it bobbed to the surface—but at his lubberly neglect of the air line. He backed into the cabin and tugged experimentally at the flexuous rubber hose. Water geysered into his helmet.

Staggering, Svenson saw why. A section of hose had looped over the razor-edged shark knife which impaled the shape that had been Bill Carmody. The shape stirred ever so little as Svenson choked and crumpled.



Conscience

by

Alice
Howland
Macomber

*Looking around, he
saw that—yes!—a man
was following him!*

OF ALL the hard cases that ever stepped aboard a ship, Bill Martin was the hardest. There wasn't, I should say, a jail from London to Callao, and from Callao to New York, that he didn't know the inside of. Not that it did him any good, for he was no sooner out of one jug than he was back in another at the next port.

All sorts of people tried to convert

him, but they never got him down. So far from being sorry for his old sins, he spent his spare time thinking out new ones.

Then, all of a sudden, he fell in love with a girl he met in Cardiff, named Milly Baker, and she with him. It wasn't surprising, for he was a fine figure of a man and mighty pleasant-spoken when he had a mind to be.

Now Milly knew, or she guessed, that Bill Martin hadn't been exactly what you'd call a model character, and she made him swear that he'd give up poker and drinks and suchlike and keep a straight course. There's no doubt but that Bill intended to keep his word, for when a man's in love he'll promise anything, being, as you might say, not altogether in his proper senses.

BILL did a trip to the River Plate on a frozen-meat boat and, for the first time in his life, came back with a clean sheet. All the time the ship was lying in Buenos Aires he hadn't gone ashore, but stayed aboard reading detective stories to improve his mind and keep him from temptation.

Bill felt so pleased with himself at having turned over a new leaf that when the ship put in at Rio he felt he ought to celebrate. He did, being carried back aboard by two of his mates and shoved into his bunk before any of the officers spotted him.

Still, there wasn't anything in that, especially as he hadn't got into trouble, so when the ship docked at Cardiff he went ashore with a better conscience than he ever could remember having before.

When he met Milly he told her how he hadn't been logged a single day's pay the whole trip. "I'm a reformed character now," said he, "and after another two or three voyages I'll have enough saved up to open a tripe-and-green-pea shop in Bute Street."

"There's plenty of time yet, Bill," Milly told him, "if you start saving now. Money soon mounts up if you don't spend it."

WELL, a morning or two after that, when Bill was scrubbing down the deck—for the ship was still in the Cardiff docks, discharging cargo—he happened to take a squint through the cabin skylight. What did he see down there in

the cabin, but the captain seated at a table counting out a wad of one-pound notes!

There must have been at least a hundred of them, all new and crisp and beautiful to look upon. When he'd finished counting them, the captain hid them behind a book on the shelf hanging from one of the bulkheads.

Even then Bill might have got the better of himself, but that evening he saw the skipper go ashore and heard him tell the steward he wouldn't be back till morning. And he saw him hand over the key of his cabin so that it could be swept out before his return.

No sooner had the skipper gone than the steward, all toggled out in his best clothes, crossed the gangway and went ashore likewise.

"There's enough money in that wad," Bill told himself, "for Milly and me to get married and set up business right away. I'd be a mug to let such a chance slip by."

There was nobody about but the ship's watchman, who was frying sausages for his supper in the galley. So Bill slipped down to the steward's pantry, took the keys always kept hanging on a hook there, and went along to the captain's cabin.

It didn't take a minute to get the wad of notes from behind the book, stuff them in his pocket, and walk out.

SAFE in the fo'c's'le, he sat down and counted out the notes—eighty-five of them, all new. Bill had never had so much money in his life in one lump, and for a time he felt dazed. There was one thing he hadn't thought of—how should he account to Milly for having so much?

Well, it looked as if it would take a cleverer man than Bill Martin to crack that one, but he couldn't very well give it up now, so he decided to have a smoke, thinking it might help him. Going to the tobacconist's he

bought himself a fourpenny cigar and lighted up. It had a good strong flavor, and in spite of being so worried, he couldn't help enjoying it as he walked along.

But he hadn't gone more than twenty or thirty yards when he had a feeling that somebody was following him. Of course, there were plenty of people about, for it was not more than eight o'clock, but that was the feeling he had. Looking over his shoulder, he saw a man not more than ten yards behind him.

It was getting dark, so Bill couldn't see the man's face, nor how he was dressed, except that he seemed a pretty ordinary person.

Bill tried to laugh it off to himself, and to make sure he wasn't really being followed, he turned down a narrow alley where there was nobody in sight. He hadn't gone more than a few paces when he heard footsteps behind him and, looking back, saw that same man following him.

"Crikey!" thought Bill. "Maybe it's a trap. Maybe the skipper saw me taking a squint through the skylight while he was counting the money and put it purposely behind that book. Then he went ashore and sent a detective to keep watch and see what happened. Maybe the detective saw me shift the book."

Now before he'd started walking out with Milly, the idea of doing a spell in the jug wouldn't have worried him a bit, for, as I've said, he knew the inside of most every jail east and west of Suez. But he knew if he got pinched now, it would be good-by to Milly and the tripe-and-green-pea shop and that he'd never be any better off than he was now.

WELL, Bill went on, and so did the other chap, always keeping a few yards behind, but not far enough away for Bill to give him the slip. At last Bill

couldn't stand it any longer, so he started to run, in the hope of outdistancing the other, bolting down some alley and getting clear away.

But he no sooner started to run than the man behind did the same, always managing to keep a little way behind, but never far enough to let Bill get out of sight.

Well, they trotted pretty nearly all around Tiger Bay.

At last they reached the wharf where Bill's ship lay. As they came up to the gangway, a desperate idea struck him—he'd slip aboard, replace the money where he'd found it, and if the other chap tried to arrest him while he was doing it, he'd just dot him one and heave him in the dock.

So he chucked away the butt of his cigar in case the glow of it should attract the night watchman, then bolted up the gangway and down into the captain's cabin. There he shoved the notes back where he'd found them, hung up the key in the steward's pantry, and went on deck.

Looking over the bulwarks, he could see the chap who'd been following him leaning against a bollard with his back to the ship, smoking a cigar butt.

"Look here, mate," said Bill, "what's the idea of following me around the way you have? Do you think I've pinched something?"

"No, mister," said he; "I didn't think you'd pinched anything, and it wouldn't have made no odds to me if you had. I was just waiting for you to throw away the stub of your cigar."

BILL was so flabbergasted that he did not know whether to be pleased at not having pinched the money, or to kick himself for being the biggest fool between Cardiff and Capetown.

Anyway, it took him three more voyages before he'd saved up enough to marry Milly and open a tripe-and-green-pea shop in Bute Street.

Mist in the Morning

by

H. Woodruff
Bissell

*On the eighth hole,
the fairway stretches
along for a long drive.*



IT hadn't taken very long. Hogan's body was in the prison morgue by 11:48, just seven minutes after he'd shuffled through the little green door. Nothing left now but for Mrs. Hogan to pick it up. She could have it; the State was through with her Jack.

She wanted him back, even just for a while. It had been lonesome ever since Jack had brought No. 1178 into South Orange with Gil Morrison crumpled up on the floor of the cab. Everything from then on had moved in a haze for Flo Hogan. There were the first visits to the prison to see Jack, then the trial and the terrible few minutes she spent on the stand facing the prosecutor who threw question after question at her, twisting and shaping her answers until she knew that she was sending Jack on his way to the chair.

It was a drab little story at best. She'd lived with her Jack for fifteen years and had been a fairly devoted wife to him. She'd been proud that he'd got the best of his drinking and had made another real start with the road. It was slow, but there he was, sober and clean, leaving promptly every morning to take his run.

That day when he brought Gil Morrison, ace of Lackawanna engineers, around for one of her Sunday dinners, she'd outdone herself, and it

had been a happy meal. And it wasn't very long after that when Jack got the job of firing for Gil on No. 1178 on the Buffalo run.

She never really knew how it was that she started meeting Gil Morrison on corners. It never meant anything to her, but something inside her called it glamour, adventure, and a change from the life she'd led. Jack knew about it, and finally most of the boys knew, too. Even Gil sensed that a lot of talking was going on.

It wouldn't have been so bad if Jack hadn't walked into the lockers when old Mike, the wiper, was passing some loud remarks about Flo and Gil. There was a bad scrap, and then every one knew that something was bound to happen.

Jack and Gil stayed on the run, but they stopped speaking. Jack would call the signals as they lurched along the roadbed, but that was all.

There was a thick mist that Tuesday afternoon when No. 1178 ground to a stop at South Orange. Gil was put into an ambulance there, but he stopped breathing before he reached the hospital. There was a bad hole in his forehead.

There wasn't much to it after that. They never found the weapon they said Jack had used, but that didn't make much difference. He didn't have much

of a defense, and the best that his lawyer could do was plead not guilty. All Jack knew, so he said, was that Gil had had his head out of the cab window for the last sixty miles of the run, trying to see through the fog and then, suddenly, there he was, slumped off the seat onto the floor, and Jack had brought him into South Orange. That's all Jack would say, and it wasn't enough.

AS THE TWO came to the eighth, H. G. was one up. Mac wasn't in form at all, mostly because the mist bothered him. He had a cold and wanted to put off the match, but H. G. thought of Tuesday as golf day, and that was that.

On the Maplewood course the eighth fairway stretches along the Lackawanna tracks for a long four hundred and ninety yards to the green. No traps to speak of, but very narrow, what with

the tracks to the right, and the seventh fairway close to the left.

H. G. got off a screamer that seemed to hug the ground as it left the tee and then went out of sight into the fog for a good two hundred and seventy-five yards.

Mac coughed, tried to shake off the dampness and teed his ball. Two practice swings and he was ready. Just as his upswing ended, a shrill whistle split the blanket of mist, and though he connected cleanly, a curving slice left the tee as a black mass roared into sight and clattered past down the track.

The next day one of the neighborhood youngsters, who alternately caddy and do early-morning ball hunting, found a ball in the road ballast. It was a pretty good ball except that it took a lot of sand and scrubbing to clean off a stubborn, reddish-brown smudge.



TIM BILLINGS leaped to his feet from a rustic chair, when a hand fell heavily upon his shoulder. In front of him stood an old, white-bearded man who looked as if he had just risen from the dead. For several minutes Billings had been asleep in the old log cabin down in Yellow Gulch. The cabin was deserted when he entered, but there was a cheery fire crackling in the stone fireplace.

"Bobcat" Returns

by
John P.
Simonson

*He gave the log a jerk,
and it crashed to the floor.*

"Hawkins!" Billings finally said. "Bobcat Hawkins. You are supposed to be dead."

"Yeah," Hawkins groaned. "It was ten years ago to-night when I was murdered in this cabin for my gold and the cougar hides I had."

Billings was silent. A demoniacal wind howled through the scrub cedars. It was a bitterly cold night. Billings had gone to the cabin for a purpose.

"So you have come back to earth again," Billings said at length as Hawkins put his lantern on the table.

"I'm just a spook," Hawkins chuckled dryly, surveying his visitor carefully.

"Spook, eh?" Billings laughed as a coyote whined out in the darkness. "What you tryin' to do, scare me? They said up at Pinto that you brought in some good-lookin' nuggets. Might show me a few. Chances are we can do business."

"Maybe so," Hawkins grinned, "but let's have a little drink first before we talk business. There's a bottle up on the shelf."

"A shot wouldn't go bad to-night. I'm tired and sleepy. It was a long ride out here," Billings said, and then pulled his chair up to the table as Hawkins stepped over to the shelf.

Hawkins turned quickly. His six-gun leaped from the leather. Billings was covered.

"Stick 'em up!" Hawkins demanded. There was a dangerous look in his cold gray eyes that Billings feared.

"What's goin' on?" Billings asked suspiciously, reaching high. It was a wound to his vanity to be outwitted by an old desert rat.

"That part is comin'," Hawkins said and drew from his corduroy coat a rusty pair of handcuffs. "Snap them things on. I ain't askin' you again."

Billings complied with the instructions without argument. It was evident to him that the prospector meant business.

"What's your next move?" Billings growled.

"Get on your feet. Hold your hands up and turn your back to me. I want your smoke iron, then you can sit down."

Billings obeyed. There was no other way out of the situation.

"What's your game, Hawkins?"

"That part is comin' soon. Now for a drink."

Hawkins filled two small glasses. Billings watched him carefully.

"Well, here's to the spook," Billings chuckled not too enthusiastically, as he lifted the liquor to his lips.

"Drink hearty. Don't it beat hell how a murderer must always come back to the scene of his dirty work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just this, Billings. You murdered me in this cabin ten years ago. You took my gold to the assay office so I found out. For years I've waited for you."

"Well, you don't look like a dead one to me."

"I'm a ghost."

"You are a fool, Hawkins. What's your game? Take off these irons before I get rough." Billings was running a bluff. He fully realized that Hawkins had the advantage and that those cold eyes had a fixed purpose in them.

"Be careful how you talk to a spook. I've got a lot of gold. Spooks ain't got no use for it. I know you like the yellow stuff. Too bad you didn't find it all the night you killed me. I'll forgive you, and now seein' you are here I'll give you all I've got."

"Listen, Hawkins, if I'd killed you, how could you still be on earth?"

"Didn't I tell you I was a spook? See that hole in my corduroy coat just over my heart. That's where you shot me."

"Nuts," Billings grunted. "What's your game? This show has gone far enough."

"Wait till you see the big show. I want to give you my gold. I mean it. Have another drink."

"Fine, but suppose I tell you I don't want gold."

"Then I'd say you're a liar, Billings. You came to get it this evening. I kinda thought if I went to Pinto and flashed them nuggets that sooner or later you would be driftin' here. You

figured you didn't do a good job of killin' me the first time, so you come to do it again. Listen, Billings! You did a nice job the first time, but you never figured on me comin' back to haunt you."

Billings was not at ease. There was something in Hawkins' manner of speaking that chilled his blood. What his game was just now he could not comprehend.

"Let's call this deal, whatever it is, off," Billings said.

Hawkins grinned but ignored the suggestion. "You will be a rich man soon. Them four logs on the north side of the cabin are easily removed. This cabin is right against the stone ledge. If you had known about the logs that night you killed me you would have found my gold mine."

"Dry up on that killin' stuff," Billings growled as Hawkins took a firmer grip on his six-gun.

"Get over an' pull the wooden pegs out of the logs. Spooks don't like to work."

Billings walked over to the logs. He tugged away tediously at the wooden pegs. The handcuffs were awkward, but in a few minutes he had all the pegs removed.

"Pull on the top log. It comes out first, then the next one comes easy."

Billings gave the log a jerk and it crashed to the floor. The three others were soon removed. He looked into a space of darkness. Hawkins turned the wick up in his lantern and took a few steps forward, but kept at a safe distance from Billings.

"That ain't a mine," said Billings. "It's a cave full of stalactites."

"It's a mine although the gateway to hell," Hawkins explained. "Step inside."

"Your lantern might go out. We can't find gold in the dark."

"Don't worry about darkness, Billings. Spooks always have a few can-

dles for special occasions like this. Step right along." Hawkins pushed Billings with his six-gun.

Billings moved forward slowly. He stopped when he came to where the cave was very narrow. At this place there was an old gate, constructed of cedars fitting snugly into the gap.

"What's the meaning of this gate?" he inquired.

"Pull on it. I raise cougars in this place. The cave covers several acres. I feed my pets good. Coyotes are plenty. The cougars come up to this gate for their meat. Have made money sellin' hides."

"For hell's sake, Hawkins, we'll both be torn to pieces if them cats come this way."

Hawkins chuckled. "They can't kill a spook, but they like coyotes. Now take this candle and go straight ahead two hundred feet, and at the end of the cave you will find a pile of gold-bearing rock. It's all yours. Don't go into any side caves. You might get lost. I'll wait here."

Billings moved forward with the flickering candle. There was no other path open to him. Hawkins remained at the gate, and when Billings was well on his way he closed the gate.

Billings never looked back until he came to the end of the cave. The old man extinguished the lantern. Billings gave a pile of rock a kick with his boot. To his surprise there in front of him was a small fortune. His feverish lust for gold made him forget his predicament, but when the hot tal-^{low} from the candle found his fingers he dropped the little light and cursed furiously. It was then that terror swept through his system. He was now thinking of the cougars. He peered back into inky blackness.

"Hawkins!" he shouted. "Bring your lantern." Hawkins was silent. Frequently Billings cursed, but only his echo mocked him. He was now wan-

dering aimlessly about in the strange place. Fear gripped him.

"Hawkins, damn you! This cave is full of cougars. The beasts are gonna tear me to pieces. If you are a living man, save me."

"I'm still kickin'," Hawkins replied, "and the avenger of my twin brother's death. You was so anxious to get gold that you murdered him. Now you got your gold. Hell have mercy on you. The cats won't."

"Save me! I'm guilty," Billings said feebly.

"That's what I thought, and I'm glad you confessed your crime, but *tell it to St. Peter*," Hawkins shouted into the blackness.

There was silence, and in a few minutes Hawkins lighted his lantern and went forward.

Billings was lying in a heap. Hawkins put his ear to his heart but there was no response. Billings was dead.

"Don't it beat hell what imagination will do at times?" Hawkins said to himself. "There ain't been a cougar in this cave in years."



Force of Habit

by Mart Lord

He laughed at its warning sign and filled the water bags.

RAWHIDE" BRALE and his young partner Tim had been prospecting the Death Valley regions for months and months when Providence one day threw them in the path of the lost mine at the foot of the Panamints.

The partners had been trudging along behind their two burros and it was old Rawhide who had noticed the shovel handle and the beam heads where they protruded from the bottom of the sand hill.

The old fellow sucked thoughtfully on his cob pipe.

"That heap thar was th' mouth of a tunnel. She caved in 'n' that caused a sand-slide from th' hill above."

"How much of 'er caved, I wonder," said Tim.

"We'll git th' tools," answered Rawhide, "an' see."

They stepped to their burros, got their spades and fell to work. By noon they had bared what Rawhide termed "a fresh mouth" of the tunnel.

This mouth was sand-choked almost to the roof, but they were certain the obstruction did not continue very far into the tunnel.

They knocked off long enough to water the burros and to snatch a bite of food. There were two water holes in the vicinity with both of which the partners were familiar.

The pool to which they had recourse

was located a quarter mile away in a small oasis, and good, cool water it offered. The other was nearer by half that distance but the partners shunned it as they would a rattler. For there was a sign over it:

BEWARE
POISON WATER

They ate their lunch in the shade of a tarpaulin canopy which they had set up on poles near to the mine. Thereafter they spent a half hour over their pipes, then they took up their work and did not stop until sundown.

A good night's rest and they were up and at it again in the gray of dawn, and ere nightfall the tunnel was sufficiently clear to allow of a man's passage.

Appraising the aged supporting timbers as they strode forward, the partners followed the tunnel for fifteen or twenty feet, when it terminated abruptly in a quartz lode. Two or three cracks with Tim's pick and a wide dull-yellow vein was visible.

Rawhide said, "Th' real thing."

Tim said, "Man, oh man, a sure-fire bonanza!"

They went out and lay down on blankets and watched the shadows deepen over the gray wastes as they dragged away on their "stoves" and mulled over their good fortune. In the black vault of the sky stars came out. From somewhere came a light breeze, driving away from the sands the last lingering heat and cooling the partners' brows.

In the starlight Tim's sharp, peaked, hawk-nosed face afforded a marked contrast to the stronger and cleaner-cut visage of Rawhide, whose long, white beard served to enhance that effect in no small degree.

As they lay there resting they talked to one another and finally got around to laying plans.

Hard-rock mining implements, new timbers, food supplies were required. The mine must be recorded without de-

lay. And if the property had been filed before, it was necessary to secure all available data upon it, although it was doubtful that any man would contest their claim to the lode, which had lain deserted for years and years.

"One of us has got to stay here an' look after it," said Tim. "An' I'd suggest that you handle th' bizness end. You're older an' wiser than me. An' I could clear things up while you're gone."

Rawhide nodded. "I make it t' town an' back in a week or less. I'll start in th' mornin'. G'night." He closed his eyes and rolled on his side. In a moment he was sound asleep.

Tim stretched out and watched the stars wink at the edge of the canopy. He made no effort to sleep, but lay wide-awake all night, forming plans of his own. He awaited daybreak impatiently. When it came he got up and tiptoed to where the water bags lay, picked up three of them and stole away. He stopped at the nearer of the two water holes, laughed at its warning sign, filled the water bags and swiftly returned to camp.

Upon arriving back there he found old Rawhide up and doing and had all he could do to keep a straight face. The old fellow yawned and asked him where he'd been. Tim replied, "Thought I'd save you-all a few steps," then shook the water bags by way of explanation. The old man muttered, "Right considerate of you."

Before setting out with the two burros, Rawhide shook hands with his partner.

The latter with never a twinge of remorse watched him trudge away and vanish in the distance. It was his aim to give the poisonous water a full day in which to do its work. To-morrow he'd set forth himself. He'd put the lode in his and in no other's name.

The thought stirred Tim and sent him rushing into the mine. He strode the

length of the tunnel with lordly air, gazing around proudly and gloating over his "ingenuity."

At the end of the tunnel he brought up short before the quartz lode and ran a loving hand over the dull-yellow streak he'd uncovered the day before. A strong impulse and he had a pick in his hands and was smashing away at the quartz. Again and again he struck and they were mighty blows. For sheer joy of it he cracked away. He didn't notice the sudden flutter of the earth about him, the low warning rumble from overhead, the moaning and groaning of the age-enfeebled supporting timbers.

He was not aware that the powerful blows of his pick had started a great sand-slide on the hill in which the tunnel was cut. The first inkling of danger he had was when a sagging timber gave way with a tremendous rending and tearing and came crashing down amid an avalanche of sand and rocks. It was then that he wheeled and leaped.

But too late.

Even as he moved there was a terrific groaning and grinding of the upper forward supports, and with a deafening roar and rumble the entire forward half of the tunnel collapsed. All

escape was cut off in that fearful crash, and Tim sprang back, just in time. He cowered against the wall of quartz, and trembled and sweated blood as he choked and coughed from the swirling dust.

In a moment the avalanche had ceased. In its place fell a terrible silence, a vast, oppressive thing that bore down upon him relentlessly, striking a nameless terror in his heart and taunting him with thought of death, with a single word that it burned on his soul, *alone, alone, alone! Here you shall die . . . alone!*

And then he was beating on the walls. Slowly suffocating. Screaming. Screeching. Shrieking.

But there was no one to hear—old Rawhide was two miles away. Two miles that he had covered without one drink.

The old man had halted at the brink of a big, clear, untainted pool and was now dumping into the sand the poison water which Tim had put in his bags. He hadn't touched a single drop of the stuff.

Going for miles without a drink, and changing the water in his bags at every fresh pool he came upon, was an old habit.

NEXT MONTH:

"Man of the Dawn"

by

Charles Willard Diffin

*A great story that moves through
the jungles of an age long dead*

In the October issue of TOP-NOTCH

TN-9

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